

**NONE GREATER THAN JOHN**  
**TOWARDS A SOCIAL-DESCRIPTION AND NARRATIVE-THEOLOGICAL**  
**STUDY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN LUKE-ACTS**

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## ABSTRACT

"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28). Thus the author of Luke-Acts expresses his basic assessment of John the Baptist.

The present study aims to understand the role of John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke-Acts through a reading that combines social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to gain hermeneutical access to the subject of our investigation.


This study seeks to achieve this aim in two ways. In the first instance there is an attempt (through recourse to a combination of the stated critical methodologies) to provide a reading of Luke-Acts that interfaces social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to make possible a rhetorical engagement with the text in a way that provides hermeneutical access to John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke-Acts. In his portrayal of John the Baptist as a prophet and witness who plays a unique role in the history of salvation, the author of Luke-Acts weaves a spell over his readers that draws them into his narrative world and into his particular theological perspective.

In the second instance, this study also aims to show how Luke-Acts preserves a unique dynamic of John the Baptist which has rather been buried in the other Gospel traditions. Through this dynamic, Luke seeks to transmit his own ideal of the authentic prophet and witness in such a way that his audience may be moved to emulate John's example with conviction and imagination both in living out their Christian ideal as well as in proclaiming the good news.




## DECLARATION

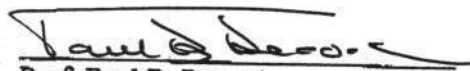
With the exception of the sources duly acknowledged in the text, this thesis is the original work of the author, and has never before been submitted to this or any other university for whatever purpose.

  
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12<sup>th</sup> March 2007  
Date

As supervisor and co-supervisor, we approve the submission of this thesis.

  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	-	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	-	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>Ant</i>	-	Flavius Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
<i>BAR</i>	-	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	-	<i>Berakot</i>
<i>BJRL</i>	-	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BTB</i>	-	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CB</i>	-	<i>Cultura Biblica</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	-	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>DBI</i>	-	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>EDNT</i>	-	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	-	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>Greg</i>	-	<i>Gregorianum</i>
<i>HeyJ</i>	-	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
<i>HTR</i>	-	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IDB</i>	-	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>Int</i>	-	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	-	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	-	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	-	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>JTSA</i>	-	<i>Journal of Theology for Southern Africa</i>
<i>LumVie</i>	-	<i>Lumière et Vie</i>
<i>NovT</i>	-	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	-	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	-	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	-	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	-	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>ST</i>	-	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	-	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>Vita</i>	-	Flavius Josephus, <i>Vita</i>
<i>War</i>	-	Flavius Josephus, <i>The Jewish War</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	-	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	-	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## TEXTS, TRANSLATIONS AND REFERENCE WORKS

### ENGLISH TEXTS

#### *The Old Testament:*

All English translations, texts, citations, chapter and verse numbering are from the English text of the BGT BibleWorks6 Greek LXX, which is based on the translation of the *Revised Standard Version*, 1971.

#### *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha:*

The quotations of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha are taken from James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, New York, Doubleday, 1983-1985.

#### *The New Testament:*

The English translations, texts and citations are those of the eighth edition (1998) of the Nestle-Aland *The Greek New Testament*, which follows the translation of the *Revised Standard Version*, 1971.

#### *New Testament Apocrypha:*

The quotations of the New Testament Apocrypha are taken from Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, Cambridge, James Clark & Co. Ltd., 1991-1992.

#### *Qumran Documents:*

The translation, numbering of documents and paragraphs, and references to the Dead Sea Scrolls are according to the text and translation of F. García Martínez & E.J.C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997-1998.

#### *Josephus:*

Texts, references to and from Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War* follow the English translation and numbering of books and paragraphs of the Loeb Classical Library editions, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1925-1965.

### GREEK TEXTS

#### *The Septuagint:*

The Greek Septuagint text followed is that of the BGT BibleWorks6 Greek LXX.

#### *The Greek New Testament:*

The text of the Greek New Testament used in this study is that of the eighth edition of the Nestle-Aland *Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### *Towards a Rehabilitation of John the Baptist*

The history of research on John the Baptist has tended to run on a parallel track to the development of research on Jesus, particularly the historical Jesus research. It is a basic assumption of this study that John the Baptist can be freed from this association of convenience,<sup>1</sup> for he is portrayed in Luke-Acts as an individual in his own right, with a mission and a programme of his own. In other words, it is not necessary to go through Jesus in order to get to John the Baptist. On the contrary, it is one of the fundamental presuppositions of this study that we are better able to appreciate the person and role of Jesus if we first understand the significance of John the Baptist in the overall plan of the *Heilsgeschichte*, for, as J.A. Darr has rightly asked: "Without the work of John, who would recognize Jesus?"<sup>2</sup> When we must draw a comparison between John the Baptist and Jesus, it is the former who is our stepping stone to the latter. Of all the New Testament writers, it is the author of Luke-Acts who puts this clearly to his audience. He attributes to John a level of initiative and individuality that is not reflected in the other Gospel traditions and that is denied him by earliest Christianity. Luke's portrayal of John the Baptist is a challenge to the reader to rehabilitate him within the biblical and prophetic tradition as well as within not only the earliest Christian tradition but also within the history of Christianity as it has evolved down to our own times.

It will be noted that though the author of Luke-Acts writes, in his portrayal of John the Baptist, from within a tradition that subordinates John to Jesus, our author succeeds in going beyond that tradition and provides much information about John that the other Gospel traditions either omitted or eliminated.

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<sup>1</sup> J.E. Taylor (*The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), however, believes that "John would not be very significant historically if he had not some contact with Jesus" (:2).

<sup>2</sup> J.A. Darr, 1992, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 78.

As will be noted in the development of the present study, scholarship has increasingly become suspicious of the canonical Gospels' portrayal of John the Baptist.<sup>3</sup> Due to the Gospel writers' over-emphasis on an exaggerated notion of John as some sort of "proto-Christian pointing the way to Jesus as Messiah",<sup>4</sup> there is an overriding tendency by nearly all the Gospel authors to have the reader "believe that John really had no importance whatsoever in his own right and that his importance was entirely the result of his witnessing to the arrival of the Messiah".<sup>5</sup> The Fourth Gospel is particularly notorious in this respect.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the emerging scholarly acknowledgment that John was a very significant figure in his own right even before Jesus had come into the picture, the deeply-ingrained negative tradition transmitted by the canonical Gospels of a rather severe figure who does not show much compassion, a preacher of apocalyptic doom, still holds sway. In the words of E. Schillebeeckx, "John is the penitential preacher prophetically announcing the imminent judgment of God. The future here is God's wrath, his inexorable sentence".<sup>7</sup> Among modern scholars P. Böhleemann has done the most to entrench this negative perception of John the Baptist.<sup>8</sup> According to Böhleemann, in comparison to John the Baptist's preaching which is marked by threats of judgment Jesus emerges as a more compassionate and forgiving good shepherd. Indeed, Böhleemann's basic position is that Luke writes about Jesus and elevates him in the way he does in order specifically to win over the followers of John the Baptist to Jesus' more liberating gospel. Luke, according to Böhleemann, is concerned to distinguish Jesus from John the Baptist in such a way to, so to speak, put John in his place in a position very much subordinate to that of Jesus. We will argue that this

<sup>3</sup> And indeed of anyone or anything else. One of the more striking features of the early Twenty-First Century has been the unrelenting and concerted, as some would say, 'attack' on some of the most basic positions of Christianity in general, and a very critical questioning of the existence of some of the eponymous figures of Christianity, or of the validity of some of the basic assumptions and foundational beliefs on which the entire Christian faith edifice rests. Thus, for example, the first decade of the century has seen the emergence of such works, among others, as M. Baigent, *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-Up in History*, London, Harper Element, 2006; R. Feather, *The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran: The Essene Mysteries of John the Baptist*, London, Watkins Publishing, 2006; T. Freke & P. Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God?*, London, Element, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> See for example at John 1:29-35.

<sup>7</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, London, Collins, 1979, 127.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Böhleemann, *Jesus und der Täufer: Schlüssel zur Theologie und Ethik des Lukas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

perception of John the Baptist could not be farther from Luke's portrait of him. Indeed, we will see how the author of Luke-Acts is at pains to portray John the Baptist as the gateway to the salvation of any who repent and receive his baptism for the forgiveness of sins, whether they be Jews *or* Gentiles.

To restate the main purpose of the present study: it seeks to rehabilitate John the Baptist from the shadows into which both the Gospel tradition and the subsequent Christian tradition have relegated him as subordinate to Jesus of Nazareth. To this end, the portrayal of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts (which will be shown to be unique within the New Testament tradition) will be studied from the perspective of social description and narrative-theological analysis. The overview of the *status quaestionis* in Lucan studies that is presented in the first part of this study will show that never before has an attempt been made towards a reading that seeks to combine social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to understand the role of key protagonists in Luke-Acts in general, or of John the Baptist in particular. While the literature survey has as one of its main purposes the discovery of a literary and methodological framework within which to situate our own investigation into how John the Baptist is portrayed in Luke-Acts, the results as presented appear to indicate that, though the work has begun, we are still some way away from a full resuscitation of John the Baptist. Our modest effort in the present study is an attempt towards taking the rehabilitation of John the Baptist one more step ahead. However, even beyond the rehabilitation of John the Baptist, the present study also seeks to take steps towards a possible model for reading Luke-Acts in general in ways that acknowledge the inseparable bond between everyday social actualities and theological expression.

In his study on the Gospel of Mark, R.M. Fowler notes that he intends to engage in "the larger dialogue taking place today between biblical scholarship and literary theory and criticism"<sup>9</sup> by advocating a shift from the story level to the discourse level in order to better appreciate that the cumulative meaning of the discourse is not to be understood as a "stable, determinate content that lies buried beneath the text, awaiting excavation [but r]ather...a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 3.

There are various ways in which Luke-Acts appeals to the participation of the modern reader. This appeal lies, for example, in the geographical arrangement (Judea-Samaria-Ends of the earth), in the relationship of events in the narrative to Roman history of the time, or in the 'historical' schema of the *Heilsgeschichte* proposed by Conzelmann, or even in the way Luke-Acts has been written to provide "profit with delight".<sup>11</sup> One way that has only recently begun to receive some attention is the way particular characters, or personalities in general, provide the lens or the voice through which the reader or hearer appropriates the coded and not so subtle messages and purposes not only of Luke-Acts,<sup>12</sup> but of other biblical<sup>13</sup> and extra-biblical works.<sup>14</sup> Our interest in John the Baptist comes in the wake of a strong wave of scholarly interest in Luke's theological and literary purposes in general, and in John the Baptist in particular. Both the footnotes and the bibliography of this study indicate how widespread is the interest in John the Baptist in biblical research at the present time. Recently claims have been made the cave in which John the Baptist supposedly lived in the wilderness has been unearthed and identified by archaeologists.<sup>15</sup> After centuries of relegation to an inferior and subordinate position, John the Baptist is being resuscitated and brought into the spotlight. He is emerging from the shadows in ways that are placing him on a par with, and at times perhaps even above Jesus. Not few are the scholars who have argued persuasively that Jesus was at some stage of his life a student and close follower of John the Baptist, and that Jesus went so far as to make the essentials of 'his master's programme' the foundation for his own proclamation. As will be noted below, not few also are the scholars who have just as persuasively argued that John the Baptist was seen by the people of his time as a forerunner *not* for Jesus, but for God.

### ***Social Description, Narrative-Theological Analysis and Hermeneutical Access***

One of the enduring legacies of critical biblical scholarship has been the acknowledgement that the written text is a reflection of, or at least presupposes an

<sup>11</sup> See the striking approach adopted by R.I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, W. Dietrich, *Das Petrusbild der lukanischen Schriften*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1972, D. Rhoads & K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, G. Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death: Audience-Oriented Criticism of Matthew's Narrative*, Sheffield, Sheffield University Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, H.W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972.

<sup>15</sup> See *BAR*, 30 (2004), 18-19.



existential or conceptual world set in time and in space. This has led to a number of scholars expressing the conviction that failure to bridge the socio-historical-temporal divide between the ancient text and the modern reader can only lead to a serious disengagement between, on the one hand, the author, his world (real or presupposed in the text), the various levels of narrative nuance, the overall story line itself (including the identities, roles and other distinctive features of the characters portrayed in it), and, on the other hand, the reader or audience. A neglect of the social distance that separates the ancient text from its modern reader renders a dialogic relationship between text and reader problematic, if indeed not altogether impossible. Social description and reconstruction thus becomes a necessary tool in articulating this distance as well as in bridging it. However, while a meaningful engagement with the biblical text is certainly enhanced by the social description of the world presupposed in the narrative, this alone is not sufficient for a meaningful engagement with the spirit of the biblical text. In the present study we propose an interface of social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to gain hermeneutical access to John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke-Acts. The rationale behind this two-dimensional approach to the subject of our investigation (i.e. social description and narrative-theological analysis) lies in the recognition that, on the one hand, the material and cultural ties that bind a biblical character like John the Baptist to particular times, places and events are concretely elucidated while, on the other hand, the narrative-theological analysis, as we have just noted, makes John the Baptist hermeneutically accessible. Further, the interface between social description and narrative-theological analysis helps to shed light on the mutual correlations between theology and social reality, or the *Sitz im Leben* and the expression of faith.

While the combination of critical approaches (social description and narrative-theological analysis as means to hermeneutical access) may appear somewhat familiar to some and possibly odd to others,<sup>16</sup> we have found this multi-dimensional approach pragmatic for the purposes of our investigation because there is a level at which these

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<sup>16</sup> See R.M. Fowler's reference to this approach (which he in fact advocates, though under slightly different rubrics) as "mixing up literary-critical apples and oranges" in *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, 3. However, Fowler does acknowledge that biblical critics do belong to different turfs or guilds that do not always appreciate each other's *modus operandi*: "Our respective guilds are different cultures, separated by different histories, languages, and concerns" (:3-4). All the more reason, therefore, that he is determined to build a bridge across different critical methodologies (:4-5).

approaches complement each other and, perhaps more to the point, they work well with the project with which this study is engaged, namely a contribution to the broader dialogue taking place in scholarship around the subject of Luke-Acts, John the Baptist, social description and narrative-theological purpose. The present study seeks to contribute to this dialogue and to studies on Luke-Acts in general by showing how the author of Luke-Acts has preserved a dynamic of John the Baptist which has been consciously or unconsciously buried in the other Gospel traditions. This study aims to show how a reading of Luke-Acts that makes use of social description and narrative-theological analysis can pave the way for a hermeneutical access to John the Baptist.

While the approach proposed in this study may not be very different in its essential lines from similar approaches attempted in other works, its application to a study on the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts contributes a unique dimension to Lucan studies. Social description helps to bridge the social distance between the world of the text and the modern reader, while narrative-theological analysis helps the reader to better engage with the theological purposes of the author.

We propose that a reading that employs social description and narrative-theological analysis is best suited to paying attention to both the story level as well as to rhetorical impact and theological *Tendenz*. The strength of the combination of the two approaches lies in that while social description gives the story line a human dimension that the reader can relate to in an immediate and personal way, the narrative-theological analysis provides a hermeneutical tool for recognizing, assessing and actualizing the theological intention of the author.

At another level, the combination of social description and narrative-theological analysis may provide the bridge between what R.M. Fowler terms "reverent reading" and critical reading:

The modern critical reading of the Bible came into being by striking a pose of critical distance from such reverent reading, but the blessings of modern biblical criticism have been mixed. Under one common scenario, the quest for greater depth and subtlety in understanding drew reverent Bible readers to embrace criticism, which indeed deepened and enriched their devotional reading of the Bible, and reverent reading and critical reading lived happily together. Under



another common scenario, however, reverent readers and critical readers of the Bible have come to a parting of the ways and heaped scorn and ridicule upon each other. Perhaps the time has come to bridge the gulf between these often estranged communities of Bible readers.<sup>17</sup>

Fowler, however, suggests that the tool best suited to this purpose is reader-response criticism which, according to him, makes available to the reader of whatever persuasion "the world that lies in front of the biblical texts – the world I live in and the world in which readers have always lived, the world of the reception of the Gospels – rather than the world of their production".<sup>18</sup>

We propose, rather, that it is precisely the other half of the equation that is omitted by Fowler that gives the biblical narrative its relevance, namely the world reconstructed or conceptualized by the author in the text. The reader relates not to a disembodied, abstract text, but to a text rooted in time and in space, no matter how far removed these may be from the reader's experience. They can always be conceptualized through codes embedded in the text. Social description is invaluable for articulating the physical and temporal span between text and reader. Our investigation aims to show, for example, how the figure of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts has been portrayed by the author in a way that makes John accessible to Luke's audience through the interface of the signals embedded in social description with narrative-theological codes fixed in a rhetorical style that is intended to capture the imagination of the reader.

### ***Luke-Acts: A 'Storm Centre' in Biblical Studies***

Interest in biblical studies has in the last few centuries taken various forms and has also led to the adoption of diverse methodologies and approaches in an attempt to contextualize the biblical world as a means to engaging with the biblical text. Our own age, marked as it is by post-modernism and secularism with their attendant theological and religious indifference, has seen an unprecedented interest in the study of biblical literature from diverse, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, perspectives. One notes, for example, a renewed interest in biblical literature from an archaeological perspective, or the study of the bible as ancient literature and/or art, as history, or as a window to the anthropological, sociological and psychological

<sup>17</sup> R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 2.

dynamics of ancient societies. This interest in biblical studies as a whole is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the proliferation of studies on Luke-Acts in the last half century or so. Some decades ago W.C. van Unnik aptly captured the mood in Lucan studies when he described Luke-Acts in his unforgettable and oft quoted phrase: a "Storm Centre" in biblical studies.<sup>19</sup> There was a time in the mid-fifties and early sixties of the Twentieth Century C.E. when it seemed as if the "storm" had reached its climax, when scholars generally sought to overcome the great divide that had emerged between the 'Luke as Historian' camp and the 'Luke as Theologian' school. For a while scholars even spoke of Luke-Acts as a 'theological history' or as a 'history of theology'. In this apparent compromise scholars sought, as it were, to take refuge from the sustained polemics that had been generated in response largely, though not exclusively, to Hans Conzelmann's threefold schematization of the epochs of the *Heilsgeschichte* as consisting of (a) the period of the prophets, (b) the period of Jesus, and (c) the period of the church.<sup>20</sup> However, this temporary respite was short-lived, for soon various other perspectives on, and approaches to Luke-Acts began to emerge. For example, literary and narrative criticisms in their various forms were soon in the ascendance and making a powerful case for their approaches and methodologies to be acknowledged. As if taking their cue from those who viewed Luke-Acts as literature (particularly as literary art), the social scientists were likewise soon claiming their share of the limelight. If anything, all this multi-dimensional resurgence of interest in Lucan studies proved that all was well with Lucan scholarship in general; Luke-Acts was living up to its unique ability to capture the scholarly imagination. Authors who seek to cement Luke-Acts to one genre, or those who seek to determine a too narrowly defined 'purpose' for the Lucan corpus, and yet others who believe Luke-Acts is best studied only from a redaction-critical perspective, form-critical point of view, textual and other specialized or technical approaches or perspectives, do not, in our view, do justice to the rich diversity and complementarity of Luke-Acts. This is without doubt one work in the New Testament that does not easily lend itself to being fettered to the predetermined ideological constructs or theological persuasions of those who study it.

<sup>19</sup> "Luke-Acts, a Storm Center in Contemporary Scholarship", in L.E. Keck & J.L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980, 15-32.

<sup>20</sup> See H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1961.

The history of research on Luke-Acts and on John the Baptist that forms the first part of this study will show, in broad outlines, the development and multi-dimensional nature of methodologies adopted by different scholars in approaching the subject matter of our investigation. In anticipation of the survey we may briefly note that from the 1970s to the present, scholars began to experiment with a variety of approaches to biblical studies. Apart from a variety of methods of the historical-critical persuasion that had been paradigmatic in biblical studies since the Nineteenth Century C.E., some scholars began to experiment with literary, narrative, social-scientific, and other criticisms. A variety of feminist and liberationist criticisms have since added their voices to these methodologies. A.N. Wilder was among the first to employ one of the new methods of biblical criticism. He concerned himself with the rhetorical forms and the various genres present in the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> J.D. Crossan, on the other hand, began to analyze the parables of Jesus from a literary perspective,<sup>22</sup> while W.A. Beardslee<sup>23</sup> and N.R. Petersen<sup>24</sup> produced handbooks and aids to help scholars explore and implement new methods of biblical criticism.

Another author who was influential in the radical departure from the textual- and redaction-critical approach in vogue before the 1970's, and who drew attention to the need to derive meaning from the text as presented, was S. Chatman.<sup>25</sup> For him, a narrative text consists of a story – what Chatman referred to as the 'what', in other words, the events and 'existents'<sup>26</sup> of the narrative – as well as a discourse – which Chatman referred to as the 'how', or the means by which the story is presented.<sup>27</sup> The meaning of a narrative is, according to Chatman, drawn from the relationship of these component parts, namely the 'what' and the 'how'. In his discussion of discourse, Chatman set forth a narrative communication model that drew on Booth's distinction between real author and 'implied author', with the addition to Booth's schema of a similar distinction on the opposite end of the communication process,

<sup>21</sup> A.N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric*, New York, Harper & Row, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> J.D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, New York, Harper & Row, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> W.A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1969.

<sup>24</sup> N.R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Chatman uses the term 'existents' to refer to characters and settings in the narrative. See his *Story and Discourse*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 9, 19.

namely the distinction between the real reader and the 'implied reader',<sup>28</sup> that is to say the reader that is presupposed by the text.<sup>29</sup>

Studying biblical narratives from a critical approach that takes the meaning of the text as a single, unbroken unit, calls for a new set of questions, as some scholars have already noted.<sup>30</sup> For example, L.P. Jones has noted how interpreting biblical narratives from a literary critical perspective

involved a shift from uncovering the various historical layers of a text or attempting to recover a single best or most reliable text to a focus on the text as we now have it. It moved away from meticulous studies that investigated a biblical work verse by verse and toward studies that looked at the larger unit. Readers stepped back to gain a view of the literary forest instead of bringing out their microscopes to dissect tiny fragments of individual trees.<sup>31</sup>

Characteristic of this new methodology was the work of C. Talbert, who advised that he did "not follow the word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, verse-by-verse method of traditional commentaries", but was concerned rather "to understand large thought units and their relationship...as a whole".<sup>32</sup> Instead of searching exclusively for the meaning behind the text, hidden somewhere in the *Sitz im Leben* of the community in and for which it was written, scholars began to pay closer attention to the literary, narrative, social-scientific and other codes present in the text and how they contributed to the overall meaning of the whole. After all, in narrative analysis language and text are conceived as mediation of being rather than a system of verbal

<sup>28</sup> The designation 'implied reader' was first coined by W. Iser (*The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), though W.C. Booth was already using the concept, without this specific designation, thirteen years earlier. See W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961, 137-138.

<sup>29</sup> S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 149-150.

<sup>30</sup> See S.D. Moore (*Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989) for an engaging discussion of the different kinds of questions raised by recent literary studies of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>31</sup> L.P. Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> C. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, New York, Crossroad, 1992, 3. See also O.C. Edwards, *Luke's Story of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981; R.A. Edwards, *Matthew's Story of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985; W. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1979; R. Kysar, *John's Story of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984; C.H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, New York, Crossroad, 1987; C.H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, New York, Crossroad, 1982.

labels.<sup>33</sup> The narrative approach thus draws attention to many aspects of the text as a whole that might be overlooked by a purely diachronic analysis.

A major implication of these considerations is that a different understanding of how meaning can be derived from literary and narrative texts is in order. For example, the presupposition that the nature and form of a text not only expresses meaning but also creates and gives rise to it appears to be a necessary starting point in approaching the text.<sup>34</sup>

In grappling with the dynamics of the interface of text and meaning M. Krieger used the images of a window and a mirror. Briefly, Krieger conceptualized text as a window through which the reader is able to view both the world, as well as the original audience (in short, the lived context) of the author. This approach, according to Krieger, enables the reader to discover the meaning of the words and the symbols behind the text, but there is no interaction of the reader with the text. Concerning the image of the mirrors, however, Krieger conceptualizes the text as a set of mirrors that reflects, back and forth, within itself. The meaning of the text unfolds as the reader interacts with the text and responds to that meaning.<sup>35</sup> R. Scholes and R. Kellogg simplified the notion of meaning as derived from a text. According to them, meaning is "a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the 'real' world, the apprehendable universe." In other words, then, understanding a narrative means finding "a satisfactory relationship or set of relationships between these two worlds".<sup>36</sup>

A close link between the literary approach to biblical literature and social description has been sought by H.C. Waetjen.<sup>37</sup> Like Jones, Talbert, Krieger, Scholes, Kellogg and others, Waetjen sees the text as made up of "signs or words [that] are decisive for the production of meaning".<sup>38</sup> These "signs or words" are indicators to a world both

<sup>33</sup> So A.N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel*, xi-xxx.

<sup>34</sup> See also L.P. Jones, *The Symbol of Water*, 31-32.

<sup>35</sup> M. Krieger, *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964, 1-70. See also R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983, 3-5, 6-8.

<sup>36</sup> R. Scholes & R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, London, Oxford University Press, 1966, 82.

<sup>37</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989.

<sup>38</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x.



behind and within the text, and the meaning of the text lies in those worlds. For both the translator as well as the interpreter of the biblical (or indeed any) text, it is essential to have a sense and a feeling for the world to which the text points. Such an engagement with the world of the text is possible when, in addition to a method that uses literary criticism, social description is also employed in order to aid both the reading itself as well as the appropriation of meaning. Waetjen expresses this in the following way:

A hermeneutical perspective that is brought to bear on texts originating in another sociocultural "world" without being informed by the disciplines of sociology, cultural anthropology, and an appropriate literary criticism is doomed to misconstruction and misinterpretation.<sup>39</sup>

Waetjen proposes the application of what he calls "historical sociology" in reading the text as this will "promote the creative experience of actualizing the text's meaning"<sup>40</sup> both in the world depicted by the text as well as in the world of the reader or hearer of the text. Both the approach to reading as well as the meaning derived from the text are enhanced "by employing a method of reading that correlates [the disciplines of sociology, cultural anthropology, and literary criticism]".<sup>41</sup>

### *Some General Perspectives on Luke-Acts*

Though an early tradition about the Third Gospel from the Muratorian Canon<sup>42</sup> states that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author, neither the Gospel nor Acts provide any information about the identity of their author. This has, however, not discouraged some scholars<sup>43</sup> from attempting to put together a profile of the author of Luke-Acts on the basis of information collected from elsewhere in the New Testament writings.

It is true that in Colossians 4:14, Philemon 1:24, and 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul speaks of "Luke the beloved physician". Whether this 'Luke' accompanied Paul on some of his

<sup>39</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x. See also W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, 2-17.

<sup>40</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x-xi.

<sup>41</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x.

<sup>42</sup> An early collection of New Testament writings which originated in Rome about 200 C.E.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, the attempts by F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, 3-9, and J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, New York, Doubleday, 1981, 35-62, among others.

missionary journeys is not certain, though the theory is an attractive one. Certainly it would go some way towards clarifying the problematic "we" passages – for example at Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16 – over which scholars of Luke-Acts have disagreed for a long time. The controversy over these passages has flared up on and off for decades and has, on the whole, generated more heat than light. As will be noted later, the hypothesis – strongly argued by J.A. Fitzmyer, among others<sup>44</sup> – that Luke was at some point a companion of Paul during some of his missionary journeys does not altogether lack a certain appeal.

The fact still remains, however, that, at least in the current state of research, Luke-Acts is an anonymous two-volume work originating, as it is supposed,<sup>45</sup> from Syrian Antioch.<sup>46</sup> The attempts by F.F. Bruce, J.A. Fitzmyer and others at establishing a precise biographical portrait of the author of Luke-Acts, though perhaps an interesting academic diversion, have up to now served mainly to affirm one fundamental fact: that we are still no nearer to really knowing the actual identity of the author of Luke-Acts. Whether we ever will does not appear to be of much consequence in itself, certainly not in respect of the Third Gospel,<sup>47</sup> though knowledge of the author's identity might significantly contribute to our understanding of the background of some passages that have long baffled scholars (for example the "we" passages mentioned in the previous paragraph). The more nuanced position of I.H. Marshall on the question of the identity of the author of Luke-Acts is helpful: "If the Gospel rests on sound tradition faithfully recorded, the name of its author is of secondary importance".<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For some of these scholars it is an almost undisputed article of faith that Luke was a companion of Paul. See, for example, the arguments adduced by F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 3-7, and J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1989, 4-7.

<sup>45</sup> See G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, 250-251.

<sup>46</sup> So, for example, J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 42, 46, 53; *Luke the Theologian*, 7. See especially Fitzmyer's listing of recent and not-so-recent scholars who take the same position. See also F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 8-9.

<sup>47</sup> So also R.E. Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 236), though he suggests it is specifically in relation to Luke 1-2 (the infancy narrative) that knowledge of the author's identity is not crucial.

<sup>48</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978, 33.

For the sake of convenience we shall continue to refer to the author of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles as "Luke" without prejudice to the question of whether or not he really was the Luke of Paul's letters, or a companion of Paul.<sup>49</sup>

While the author of Luke and Acts may not be known, the unity of these works is, however, so widely attested by modern authors that it calls for little discussion here. Suffice it to say that the evidence in support of this unity has been convincingly established by many scholars, chiefly on the basis of a common dedication to Theophilus, a kinship in style and emphasis, the reference to a "first book" in Acts, and other indications that appear to support the hypothesis that the two volumes were intended to be read together.

The precise dating of the Third Gospel (as in the case of the other Synoptic Gospels) and Acts is a rather difficult if not altogether futile exercise due to the countless historical, geographical, as well as chronological inconsistencies all too often encountered in these writings. There are, however, indications in the text of Luke-Acts that make it possible to have a general (and indeed in some cases quite specific) idea of the chronological and geographical setting for events as well as for the possible audience for which the narrative was originally intended. For example, the author of Luke-Acts seems to know about the siege and fall of Jerusalem, to which Luke 21:20-24 alludes.<sup>50</sup> Luke 19:43-44 also appears to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, the earliest date for the Third Gospel would probably be some time after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The letters of Paul –largely believed to have been written around the middle of the First Century C.E. – were probably collected and assembled before the end of that century. Luke, however, does not appear to have known of them; at least he does not mention them, whereas he describes Paul's ministry in the fullest details in Acts. In this connection, however, the observation made by many scholars, that there is a marked difference between the Paul of the

<sup>49</sup> See the interesting discussion by J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 4-7, who appears convinced that "The acceptance of the We-Sections as part of a diary that the author of Acts incorporated at places into his account of Paul's ministry and restriction of its data to their face value allows one to conclude that the author of the Third Gospel and Acts was indeed Luke, a Syrian of Antioch on the Orontes, a physician (as he is called in Col 4:11), and a sometime collaborator of Paul the Apostle" (:7). See also E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971, 85-87.

<sup>50</sup> So also G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 278-279.



epistles and the Lucan Paul should be noted. E. Haenchen,<sup>51</sup> for example, has noted three major areas in which Luke's portrayal of Paul is at striking variance with the Paul of the epistles:

(a) the presentation by Luke of Paul as a miracle worker (Acts 13:6-12; 14:8-10; 20:7-12) is in contradiction with what Paul says of himself in some of his letters – notably in 2 Corinthians 12:12;

(b) the presentation of Paul by Luke as an outstanding orator, never at a loss for the right words (Acts 17:22-31; 21:40; 22:1-2) is at marked variance with how the Paul we encounter in the epistles perceives himself as a weak and feeble speaker, altogether quite unimpressive (2 Corinthians 10:10);

(c) Luke never once refers to Paul as an apostle – for our author only the Twelve are accorded this distinction, and even Paul has himself occasionally to appeal to their authority on major decisions and take guidance from them, as, for example, at Acts 15:22-29 on the decision regarding some basic differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians and how these are to be resolved. In some of his letters Paul, however, not only appropriates the title 'Apostle' to himself, but he practically demands that the communities he has founded recognize him as such. In the matter of Paul's claim to apostleship, it is to be noted how Acts 13:31; 10:41; 1:21-22 are in stark contrast to Galatians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 15:5-8. F.F. Bruce<sup>52</sup> has noted, more or less, similar areas of difference or contradiction between the Lucan Paul and the Paul of the epistles but, unlike Haenchen, Bruce attempts to see also the similarities between Luke's Paul and the Paul of the epistles, but even Bruce is eventually forced to the conclusion that "whatever he was in Luke's eyes, Paul was no hero in his own eyes."

The fact that Luke appears to be ignorant of Paul's letters suggests a time before the end of the First Century C.E. as a possible date for both the Third Gospel and Acts. It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that Luke-Acts was most probably written some

<sup>51</sup> E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 113-116.

<sup>52</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 52-59.

time between 80 C.E. and 100 C.E.<sup>53</sup> It is not possible, in the current state of research, to be more precise than this.

From the prologue to the Third Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) we gather that Luke was a 'third generation' Christian.<sup>54</sup> In this prologue Luke speaks of (a) "eyewitnesses", (b) "ministers of the word", and (c) his own composition. We concur with R.E. Brown's supposition that Luke's audience was "predominantly Gentile Christian...Acts would be explicable if Luke was writing for a Gentile church".<sup>55</sup> A more precise geographical origin of Luke-Acts, and a more accurate location of Luke's audience are not easy to establish, though it can be noted that the work did not originate in Palestine.<sup>56</sup> This, in the opinion of Brown, is confirmed by the fact that, among other indicators, "The Gospel is noticeably lacking in Hebrew words, local Palestinian color, and direct OT citations."<sup>57</sup>

As noted earlier, our hypothesis is that Luke's Christian community was still grappling with the teething problems of a young and culturally diverse religious movement that was often beset by hostile elements, both from within its own ranks – for example the sort of teething problems to which Acts 15 bears testimony – as well as from without (for example, persecution by "the Jews" – Acts 4:18-21; 5:22-33; 8:1; 13:44-47). Luke-Acts was thus written with the benefit of hindsight, and the author offers his own considered (or "orderly") interpretation of the events "which have been accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1). Both the Third Gospel and Acts offer well-ordered and well-argued positions (in keeping with the author's stated intention) which Luke offers to his audience for its considered response.

While the author's community may still have been dealing with organizational and social hurdles and upheavals on different fronts, there however remained one major and all-encompassing difficulty with which Luke's community had apparently failed

<sup>53</sup> See also R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 235-236. Note especially Brown's assertion that "Luke's Gospel was written in a church of the Gentile mission...that was an outgrowth of the Pauline missionary effort...in the 70s or 80s." (:235).

<sup>54</sup> See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 235.

<sup>56</sup> So G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 250-258, J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 35, 58, among others.

<sup>57</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 235.

to come to terms, namely the non-occurrence of the avidly awaited-for Parousia. This was a point of such significance for Luke's audience that H. Conzelmann would later construct his thesis of a three-tiered progression in the unfolding history of salvation<sup>58</sup> specifically in order to address the issue of the non-event of the Parousia. The proclamation of the earliest Christians had emphasized the imminence and urgency of the Parousia. Paul, for his part, believed so much in the imminent return of Jesus that he discouraged some members of the Christian community in Corinth from engaging in such mundane things as marriage, since – as he thought – the Parousia was practically upon them and all should be living in instant readiness for it (1 Corinthians 7:25-28).<sup>59</sup> Jesus himself had also communicated the immediacy and urgency of the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>60</sup>

This sense of urgency regarding the expected Parousia was accompanied by the expectation of a decisive climax in world events and a transformation on a cosmic scale. However significant the message of Jesus and that of the early missionaries had been, and still was, it had become a puzzle, and indeed a crisis of faith for many, that this climax, this 'End' had not yet happened, nor, indeed, did there appear to be any indications that it might occur any time soon. Instead, the routine of daily life was seen to continue apace. Luke, in his own way, recognizes and articulates this crisis of expectation for his community, and he therefore presents the story of Jesus in the Third Gospel as the beginning (or at least one of the initial stages) of an ongoing and longer history of Christianity rather than as an end in itself. Because the plan of salvation is still unfolding, Luke's community is exhorted to persevere. Thus, for example, Luke exhorts his community to be not overly concerned about the delay of the Parousia, but rather about present realities. Luke addresses the concern of his community clearly and directly: "the end will not be at once" (Luke 21:9). In Acts 1:6-7 Jesus is asked: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?", to which Jesus emphatically responds: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority". The message being addressed to Luke's audience is clear: the Parousia will occur in God's own good time. In the meanwhile the Christian community is to fulfill its mission to be witnesses to Jesus "to the end of

<sup>58</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*.

<sup>59</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 7:29-40.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, at Mark 1:15 and 9:1, both of which emphasize the proximity of the Kingdom of God.

the earth" (Acts 1:8). Similarly, when in Acts 1:9-10 the apostles stand gazing upwards after the ascension of Jesus, the two men dressed in white address them almost like people caught napping on a job: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven", and one can almost hear in this gentle chiding the unexpressed command: "In the meantime, go about your business!"; and this is indeed what the apostles do, for immediately after this episode we next encounter them gathered together for the purpose of electing the successor to Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26), after which the serious business of proclaiming the good news begins.

### ***Basic Presuppositions***

Our use of social description and narrative-theological analysis in this study of the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts rests upon certain fundamental presuppositions that it is necessary to articulate.

Firstly, we accept the hypothesis that the Third Gospel (according to Luke) and the Acts of the Apostles are one work, written, for purposes of convenience, by Luke, a Gentile Christian. We accept further the hypothesis that the two works were meant to be read together, with the Acts of the Apostles as a sequel to the Third Gospel.

Secondly, the hypothesis that holds that Luke-Acts was written both to be read as well as to be heard is, as far as our reading convinces us, amply borne out by the nature of the text itself. The overall arrangement of the narrative, the vividly descriptive and evocative language as well as the engrossing rhetorical style of the author are clearly meant to hold and keep the interest and the attention of both lector and auditor.

Thirdly, we have no argument with the hypothesis that Luke-Acts was written for a largely Gentile Christian community which, however, had a small but apparently quite powerful body of Jewish Christians. That there are more than mere hints of serious polemic and flashpoints between the two 'camps' within the earliest Christian community is amply borne out by texts such as Acts 15.

Fourthly, in the absence of scholarly consensus on the question regarding the origin or provenance of Luke-Acts, it appears reasonable in the current state of research to work on the hypothesis that Luke-Acts was written in Syrian Antioch, and that perhaps Luke, the author, may have been a some time companion of Paul.

Fifthly, the hypothesis has gained some currency in biblical scholarship that, certainly in part, the main story line, or plot or *Tendenz* is consciously communicated by the author through the roles and fortunes he assigns to the characters (both major and minor) of his narrative. Indeed, this will clearly be seen in the present study to be the case in the way in which the author of Luke-Acts has carefully crafted and executed his portrayal of John the Baptist.

Naturally we are under no illusion whatsoever that each of these points above continues to be hotly debated among scholars. It is however beyond the scope of the present investigation to engage in the endless polemics over these matters. This investigation attempts, rather, a reading of Luke's portrayal of John the Baptist that makes use of social description and narrative-theological analysis as means towards hermeneutical access to John the Baptist.

### ***Outline of the Present Study***

Our investigation of the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts begins with a brief literature survey which seeks to identify the major trajectories of critical research in Lucan studies from the 1950's to the present. This forms PART ONE of this study, and it is divided into four subsections, each of which considers a different line of critical approach to Lucan studies during this period. Luke-Acts has been studied from the perspectives of history, theology, literature and the social sciences. Each of these approaches is briefly reviewed, and the review is followed by observations on how different scholars have treated John the Baptist under each of the methodological approaches indicated.

In PART TWO we attempt a socio-historical description and reconstruction of the world of John the Baptist, covering largely the period from the late Second Temple to the first half of the First Century C.E. The purpose of this section is twofold: Firstly it is an attempt to bridge the socio-historical-temporal divide already referred to above



between the world of John the Baptist as perceived by the author of Luke-Acts, and the modern reader. Secondly, the aim is to record our own conviction, as well as to take seriously the warning of H.C. Waetjen, that

A hermeneutical perspective that is brought to bear on texts originating in another sociocultural "world" without being informed by the disciplines of sociology, cultural anthropology, and an appropriate literary criticism is doomed to misconstruction and misinterpretation.<sup>61</sup>

John the Baptist was a child of his time, whether this is understood in terms of the various forms of the Judaism of the time, or of the many prophetic and eschatological expectations and movements that so strongly influenced and, in varying degrees, informed the world view of many Jews of John's time. It is in this world that John the Baptist lived and exercised his prophetic ministry.

The investigation of the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts, presented in PART THREE, is prefaced in the first section by a look at the way John is portrayed in other ancient literature (e.g. the canonical New Testament Gospels) more or less contemporaneous with Luke-Acts, or in other writers who also reflect the world of the late Second Temple up to about the end of the First Century C.E., especially the work of the Romanized Jewish historian Flavius Josephus as well as the authors of the extra-canonical writings of the early Christian era. It is partly in the way in which the author of Luke-Acts differs from his sources and his contemporaries in his portrayal of John the Baptist that Luke's particular *Tendenz* as well as his rhetorical aims manifest themselves. We have already noted above how Luke preserves a unique dynamic on John the Baptist which the other writers have either omitted or to which they may not have had access.

In the second section of Part Three we undertake a close investigation of the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts. To this end, some Lucan texts (both from the Third

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<sup>61</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, x. It is largely on these counts, as we have noted above, that R.M. Fowler's reader-response critical approach fails to convince, for as Fowler states, his aim in reading the biblical text is not to recreate or to live in the world in which the texts were produced or presumed by the author to have been produced, but Fowler's main interest lies rather "in the world I live in, and the world in which readers have always lived" (R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 2). Such a disembodied, nebulous and at best anonymous location of the text and its characters is fraught with methodological inconsistencies and pitfalls. For example, what becomes of the significance of John the Baptist's wilderness ministry, or of Jesus' driving of the money changers out of the Temple?

Gospel and from the Acts of the Apostles) that we have identified as key to this discussion are indicated and studied at some length. The material on John the Baptist that is unique to Luke-Acts is given prominence in order to highlight the particular *Tendenz* of Luke's portrayal of John as a prophet and witness who plays a unique role in the history of salvation. It is in this section that the social description of the world of John the Baptist undertaken in Part Two of this study interfaces with narrative-theological analysis of the indicated texts on John the Baptist drawn from Luke-Acts, and this in turn opens up hermeneutical access to John the Baptist in a way that Luke's portrayal of him challenges the reader to emulate his example.

A final word on the overall outline of this study is that after the literature survey in Part One, the general direction of our investigation will proceed from social description, to narrative-theological analysis, and ultimately to a hermeneutical process that will take into account the overall rhetorical effect of Luke's portrayal of John the Baptist on his audience, then and now. This fusion of critical approaches is undertaken as an attempt at reading a biblical text that is as rich in narrative style and theological persuasion as it is notoriously difficult to pin down to a particular genre or to one too narrowly defined purpose.

## PART ONE LUKE-ACTS: 1950'S TO THE PRESENT

### 1. LUKE-ACTS AND HISTORY

#### 1.1 Introduction

The following survey of Lucan studies intends to investigate *trends* and *trajectories*, as well as to indicate some of the more common areas of interest and debate that have motivated scholarship's long engagement with Luke-Acts.

Various images have been used to capture the overall trend in modern Lucan studies. C.H. Talbert has referred to them as 'shifting sands',<sup>62</sup> by which phrase he aptly captures the movements, changes in points of emphasis, and developments that have been characteristic elements of studies on Luke-Acts since the 1950's. Another scholar of some note, W.W. Gasque, has described recent studies on the Acts of the Apostles as a "fruitful field",<sup>63</sup> especially in view of the great interest that this book has generated in scholarly, literary, theological, and historical fields of specialization. But perhaps the most abiding image used to date to describe the trend in Lucan studies is that coined by W.C. van Unnik, who described Luke-Acts as a 'storm centre' in New Testament studies.<sup>64</sup> Though van Unnik made this insightful observation back in the 1960's, it is, if anything, a truer reflection of the state of Lucan studies today than it was then. Certainly, up to that time, and in fact until only recently, the positions of scholars on Luke's writings were polarized and perhaps even cast in stone by various schools of thought (one heard more of the hypotheses of the Tübingen School, or of the British School, or some similar designations, than of the Lucan writings themselves). However, recent approaches have tended to move away from such dogmatic, national, or even denominational approaches and have instead begun to define (some would say re-define) Luke's writings from a much broader perspective. The current trend, as we shall see, is more amenable to a multiplicity of methodologies and approaches. There has been welcome fluidity and flexibility of approach that has greatly widened the scope for our understanding and appreciation of Luke's writings.

<sup>62</sup> C.H. Talbert, "Shifting Sands: The Recent Study of the Gospel of Luke", *Int* 30 (1976), 381-395.

<sup>63</sup> W.W. Gasque, "A Fruitful Field: Recent Study of the Acts of the Apostles", in W.W. Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1989, 345-359.

<sup>64</sup> W.C. van Unnik, "Luke-Acts, a Storm Center in Contemporary Scholarship", 15-32.



If for van Unnik Luke-Acts was a 'storm centre', for R.I. Pervo, on the other hand, Luke-Acts is "the eye of the storm"<sup>65</sup> in New Testament research.

When F. Bovon was compiling his survey on thirty-three years of Lucan research (1950 to 1983) he believed that, within that period, scholarship had already reached 'the peak of the storm'.<sup>66</sup>

However, not all Lucan studies have always been of a standard acceptable to advanced critical scholarship, a state of affairs that compelled F. Bovon to say of Luke that he was "the most abused evangelist".<sup>67</sup> For A. von Harnack, all possible errors and difficulties that can be (and often have been) encountered in New Testament studies in general are concentrated in Luke-Acts – a veritable Pandora's box of New Testament criticism *faux pas*. In his observation that

Alle Fehler, die in der neutestamentlichen Kritik gemacht worden sind, haben sich in der Kritik der Apostelgeschichte wie in einem Brennpunkt gesammelt<sup>68</sup>

von Harnack in fact expresses a sentiment very similar to that of Bovon.

Van Unnik's description of Luke-Acts as a 'storm centre' in New Testament studies is an indication of the occasional pitched scholarly battles that have been fought over the works of the 'abused evangelist'. The somewhat pessimistic (but nonetheless realistic) assessment made by W.W. Gasque in the 1989 edition of his literature survey on Acts still holds true: scholars of Luke-Acts are not anywhere near a common agreement even on fundamental and key issues such as, for example, the purpose of Luke's writings, the identity of his audience, and even the identity of Luke himself, whether Luke wrote as a theologian or as a historian, the precise nature of the relationship of Luke's Christian community with the Jews, the Romans, and with their pagan environment in general.<sup>69</sup> And, of course, there is, and has always been, the

<sup>65</sup> R.I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 1-11.

<sup>66</sup> F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-three Years of Research (1950-1983)*, Allison Park, Pickwick Publications, 1987, 11.

<sup>67</sup> F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> A. von Harnack, *Lukas der Arzt: Der Verfasser des dritten Evangeliums und der Apostelgeschichte*, Leipzig, Engelmann, 1906, 87.

<sup>69</sup> W.W. Gasque, *A History*, 305.

perennial (if not polemical) question of the differences between the Paul of Luke and the Paul of the epistles.<sup>70</sup> All these, and other related issues, have been the stuff of Lucan studies for decades. But are they still? It will be seen in the unfolding study how some modern approaches have sought to go beyond the traditional models of Lucan studies to an approach that takes into consideration the principles and methods of literary criticism in its various forms, as well as the insights drawn from the social-sciences.

The differences of opinion generated among scholars by these issues, and the lack of scholarly consensus on Luke-Acts in general, though treated in nearly all literature surveys and in the most scholarly commentaries, are especially highlighted in some widely acclaimed surveys that have appeared in the last few decades, such as A.J. Mattill's *Luke as a Historian in Criticism since 1840* (1959), W.W. Gasque's *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (1989), F. Bovon's *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-Three Years of Research [1950-1983]* (1987), and E. Richard's "Luke – Writer, Theologian, Historian: Research and Orientation of the 1970's".<sup>71</sup> Since the indispensable contribution of these writers to scholarship, a number of later scholars have devoted their own work to critiquing, developing, or sympathizing with points raised in one or more of these initial surveys.

Our own brief investigation will seek to present not just a synthesis of the areas already covered, particularly (but not exclusively) in the three surveys cited above, but also to carry the discussion forward to include the emerging and growing shift to the narrative approach to Luke-Acts (or what is now commonly referred to in literary circles as 'narratology'), as well as to the social-scientific methodology. Because of the vastness of the existing bibliography on Luke-Acts, we are constrained to be rather selective in our choice, dwelling on only a small representative sample of works on the subject, especially those by the more prominent representatives of their respective point of view. For a presentation of the wider spectrum of recent opinion

<sup>70</sup> The British scholar, William Paley (1743-1805) is credited with being the first to examine this problem in detail. Though scholars have noted that Paley did not approach the matter from a strictly scriptural point of view, nor yet from the terms of reference adopted by later scholarship, it is noted that he nonetheless deals with basically the same problem: we have two pictures of Paul in the New Testament that are at times at great variance with one another.

<sup>71</sup> E. Richard, "Luke – Writer, Theologian, Historian: Research and Orientation of the 1970's", *BTB* 13 (1983), 3-15.

on Luke-Acts the reader is referred first of all to the three surveys of Mattill, Gasque, and Bovon, cited above (including any others that may have appeared in the meantime), as well as to some of the most recent commentaries.<sup>72</sup>

The picture that emerges from the brief survey of trends in Lucan studies presented above is thus one that is as exciting as it is baffling; as stimulating as it is discouraging. Because of Luke's innate ability to generate an incredibly diverse plethora of opinions among readers in general and critical scholars in particular, it is probably no exaggeration to say that Luke-Acts is the single most studied and fought over body of literature in the New Testament, and therefore the assertion by Gasque that

the soil of Lukan studies has been carefully cultivated, a variety of promising seeds has been planted, it has been well watered, and there is evidence of much growth<sup>73</sup>

is certainly a true reflection of the *status quaestionis*.

Though some scholars like Talbert, Kümmel, and indeed Gasque himself lament the sharp differences that have divided Lucan scholars, even to the point where it has become impossible to find agreement on basic and key issues, it is nonetheless correct to say that we have yet to come across a period of scriptural studies in which Luke-Acts has not exercised a considerable amount of interest among scholars. The

<sup>72</sup> One has in mind here the commentaries and bibliographies of J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX, X-XXIV*, 1981-1985; J. Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998; J. Fitzmyer, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New York, Doubleday; J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981; J. Dupont, *Nouvelles Etudes Sur Les Actes Des Apôtres*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1984; F.F. Bruce, *Acts*; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*; R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke Acts*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1986-1990; I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*. See also the commentary by B. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998. There are, in addition, many articles that have come out in recent years that discuss the developments in Lucan research since the 1950's. Among the most incisive of these are C.H. Talbert's "Shifting Sands: The Recent Study of the Gospel of Luke", *Int* 30 (1976), 381-395; W.W. Gasque, "A Fruitful Field: Recent Study of the Acts of the Apostles", *Int* 42 (1988), 117-131; I.H. Marshall's "Recent Study of the Gospel According to St. Luke", *ExpTim* 80 (1968), 4-8; J. Taylor, "The Making of Acts: A New Account", *RB* (1990), 504-524; P.S. Minear, "Dear Theo: The Kerygmatic Intention and Claim of the Book of Acts", *Int* 27 (1973), 131-150; E. Rasco, "Conzelmann y la 'Historia Salutis': A Proposito de 'Mitte der Zeit' y 'Die Apostelgeschichte'", *Greg* 46 (1965), 286-319.

<sup>73</sup> That is, if 'growth' is not narrowed down to consensual positions only, but is broadened to cover the overall spectrum of debate, which also includes differing positions and polarized opinions, for that too is certainly an indication of growth as scholars engage with and against each other in an ongoing search for a deeper understanding of Luke-Acts; W.W. Gasque's "A Fruitful Field", which is an addendum to his *A History*, 345.

contrary has in fact been the case. The field has been, and continues to be truly a 'fruitful' one.

Various literature surveys of modern studies on Luke-Acts have appeared either in research monographs, or in annotated bibliographies,<sup>74</sup> as well as in the more scholarly commentaries. A broad analysis of these surveys reveals that we are currently yet again caught up in a transitional stage; the indications are that at the present time we are in the middle of possibly a third significant shift that studies on Luke-Acts have undergone since the 1950's. In this period we have seen Lucan studies shift from an emphasis on Luke the historian, to Luke the theologian, to Luke not just as a writer in relation to his reader or readers, but also as a narrator in relation to his audience and, especially in the present period, to Lucan studies viewed through the lenses of the social-sciences and paleo-pathology.<sup>75</sup> All four phases will be dealt with in some detail below.

In the last half-century, studies on Luke-Acts have experienced a flowering in terms of depth of analysis, erudite scholarship (for example the works of F.F. Bruce,<sup>76</sup> E. Haenchen,<sup>77</sup> H. Conzelmann,<sup>78</sup> J. Jervell,<sup>79</sup> J. Fitzmyer,<sup>80</sup> B. Witherington,<sup>81</sup> to name

<sup>74</sup> Such as M.A. Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1991, 138-146, and *What Are They Saying About Luke?*, Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1989, 141-149.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas F. Carney has studied the social history of the ancient Mediterranean from a medical perspective. His findings are as interesting as they are informative. Basing himself on the data from Carney's book, (*The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity*, Lawrence, Coronado, 1975), Rohrbaugh makes the following observations about the life-expectancy as well as the general health of the ancient Mediterranean population: of the children born in the pre-industrial cities of the Roman period "about one-third of those who survived the first year of life were dead by the age of 6. Nearly 60 percent of these survivors had died by age 16. By age 26, 75 percent were dead; and by age 46, 90 percent were gone...Death rates were not evenly spread across all elements of the population but fell disproportionately on the lower-class population of both city and village...Studies by paleopathologists indicate that infectious disease and malnutrition were widespread...At 32 or 33 years of age, if indeed he lived that long, Jesus would have been older than perhaps 80% of his hearers...Since few poor people lived out their thirties, we may also have to revise our picture of Jesus. He was hardly one who died in the prime of life" (:88). R. Rohrbaugh (ed.), *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1996, 5.

<sup>76</sup> While Bruce (*Acts*, 1-80) generally cites other authors only to dismiss their views, he nonetheless does from time to time give some helpful indications and even discussions of their various positions. In his discussions of some of the key questions pertinent to the study of Luke-Acts (with a heavy leaning on Acts – e.g. authorship and date, the question of Paul, purpose and plan of Acts, Luke as a historian, etc.), Bruce occasionally brings out, especially in the footnotes, some annotated bibliographical information that does not otherwise appear in the bibliography proper.

<sup>77</sup> Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 14-50) gives a survey of historical and critical research on Luke's writings. He gives Dibelius, Conzelmann, and Käsemann (scholars who belong to his school of thought) a more sympathetic hearing than he does most of the commentaries of the time (:48-49).



but a few of the most influential scholars), and a comparison with the historiography of ancient writers like Plutarch, Thucydides, Herodotus, Strabo, Josephus,<sup>82</sup> as well as with the writings of the community of Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See H. Conzelmann's *The Theology of St. Luke*, which has greatly contributed to scholarly debate on various issues pertaining to Luke-Acts, but in a particular way to his controversial view of the *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).

<sup>79</sup> Though he does not give a literature survey on Luke-Acts as such, Jervell (*Die Apostelgeschichte*, 9-47) has a very extensive bibliography that covers nearly all of the recent works on Luke-Acts up to 1998.

<sup>80</sup> See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 3-34, for an outline of the current state of Lucan studies, which includes a very informative bibliography. The bibliography in his two-volume *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX and X-XXIV*, as well as in *The Acts of the Apostles*, is extensive, but less user-friendly as it is scattered throughout the commentaries, making the index of commentators and modern authors the only practical (if time-consuming) way of tracing the works of scholars cited in these otherwise very good commentaries.

<sup>81</sup> This commentary (also published in 1998), together with those of Fitzmyer, is the most extensive commentary on the Acts of the Apostles to come out in English in the last decade or so. The bibliographies (topical in Fitzmyer, and consecutive in Witherington) are as comprehensive as the commentaries themselves.

<sup>82</sup> Various works that place Luke on par with ancient historians of note are readily available. We cite a representative few: C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1990; S. Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1992; B. Witherington (ed.), *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; B.W. Winter and A.D. Clarke (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, I: Ancient Literary Setting*, Grand Rapids, William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993; E.P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1989. See especially pages 276-298 in which Sanders and Davies note some striking parallels in both language and style between Luke and Josephus. Perhaps the writer who draws the most from a wide spectrum of classical Greek writers and historians (though he compares these mostly with the 'unknown god' of Acts 17:23) is P.W. van der Horst in his essay "The Altar of the 'Unknown God' in Athens (Acts 17:23) and the Cults of 'Unknown Gods' in the Graeco-Roman World", in P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction*, Kampen, Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994, 165-202. Van der Horst makes reference to a wide range of parallels between Acts and a broad spectrum of Greco-Roman historians and writers that includes like Xenophon (*Memorabilia Socratis I*), Pausanias (*Description of Greece*), Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*), Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*), Herodotus (*History*), Aratus (*Phaenomena*), Euripides (*Iphigeneia Taurensis*), and many others. In all of them, and in more that we have not cited, van der Horst has been able to find some parallel, no matter how small or incidental, to Luke's writings. Towards the end of his article, van der Horst concludes that in writing Acts (especially 17:23), Luke followed or used pagan material, but did so in such a way that it could be made palatable to Christians. The main point, however, is that Luke, according to van der Horst, is firmly set in the mould of classical Greco-Roman historiography, and Acts 17:23 is the clearest example of this.

<sup>83</sup> A fascinating study in this respect is G.J. Brooke's "Luke-Acts and the Qumran Scrolls: The Case of MMT", in C.M. Tuckett (ed.), *Luke's Literary Achievement*, Sheffield, Sheffield University Press, 1995, 72-90. Brooke cites four parallels between Luke (the Third Gospel) and the Qumran scrolls (e.g. Lk. 1:32-35=4Q246; Lk. 4:16-21=11Qmelch; Lk. 4:18=4Q521; Lk. 1:46-55=4Q365, frag. 6, 2:1-7). Brooke comes to the attractive though as yet unproven conclusion that some passages in Luke can be used to get a better understanding of some of the texts in the Qumran scrolls. For a differently nuanced comparison between Luke-Acts and the Qumran scrolls, see further J.A. Fitzmyer, "Jewish Christianity in Acts in Light of the Qumran Scrolls", in L.E. Keck & J.L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 233-257. Whereas Brooke based his comparison on the Third Gospel, Fitzmyer establishes points of correspondence between Acts and the Qumran literature (on page 252) as follows: Acts 1:20=CD 11:20; Acts 2:16=CD 10:16; 16:15; Acts 2:25=CD 6:7-8; Acts 2:34=CD 4:20 (?); Acts 3:21=CD 4:13-14; Acts 4:11=1QpHab 12:3; 4QpIs<sup>b</sup> 2:10; Acts 4:25=CD 4:13-14; Acts 7:6=CD 6:13; 8:9; Acts 7:7=CD 6:13; 8:9; Acts 7:42=4QFlor 1:2; Acts 7:48=CD 6:7-8 (?); Acts 13:33=4QFlor 1:2; 11Qmelch 9-10; Acts 15:15=1QS 8:14; 5:17; CD 7:19; 4Qflor 1:2; Acts 28:25=CD 4:13-14. In concluding his analysis of the connections between Acts and the Qumran writings, Fitzmyer admits that though "the

Broadly speaking, an analysis of scholarly studies on Luke-Acts since the 1950's reveals four significant stages and shifts in perspective: from viewing Luke as a historian, to viewing him as a theologian, to viewing him and his work from the principles and methodological approaches of modern literature and, most recently, to studying Luke-Acts from the principles of the social-sciences, including even from the perspective of the stage, arts, and other sciences.<sup>84</sup> It may be instructive to trace the trajectory of Lucan studies as it has gone through these four stages. In the following survey, our main focus will be on general *trends*, without in any way attempting to go into any detailed discussion or evaluation of any scholar under discussion, except in the case of Hans Conzelmann, for reasons that will become evident in the unfolding discussion.

### 1.2 Luke as a Historian

The approach to Luke as a historian has been largely (though by no means exclusively) the concern of British scholars, of which J.B. Lightfoot<sup>85</sup> was the founding father in the nineteenth century. Lightfoot was mainly responsible for shaping the direction of a rather conservative view of the historical value of Acts. Subsequent British scholarship built upon the foundations established by Lightfoot.<sup>86</sup>

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influence of Qumran literature on Acts is not as marked as it is in other New Testament writings (e.g. John, Paul, Matthew, Hebrews)", it is nevertheless a fact that "the features of Essene tenets and practices which we have surveyed have often shed important light on passages of Acts" (:253). Fitzmyer, therefore, does not lay as much emphasis on the correspondences between Acts and the Qumran writings as Brooke lays on the relationship between the Third Gospel and the Qumran scrolls. What is striking, however, is that both scholars have, in their different ways, each established some convincing relationships between Luke-Acts and the literature of Qumran.

<sup>84</sup> Some may dismiss this (and indeed any) division of Lucan studies into neat categories as an oversimplification of a rather complex work, but this methodological approach certainly has its place in a work such as ours, in which we make no pretences at either exhausting the subject matter, or adopting a strict periodization of the trajectory followed by Lucan studies since 1950. We must therefore disagree with Gasque on this point in his *History*, 4. It should anyhow be clear, given the evidence, that it is not always practical to speak of four (or more, or less) clearly definable periods in Lucan research, since most developments ran concurrently but quite independently of one another. We can, therefore, not speak of a clearly demarcated temporal progression in Lucan studies (such as, for example, ten years of historical emphasis, 20 years of theological emphasis, five years of literary analysis, or any similar categories). This is as unscholarly as it is simplistic, ignoring as it does the complex and concurrent interplay between the various approaches. For example, German scholars did not wait until the British scholars had exhausted their fascination with the historical reliability of Luke-Acts before they moved into the breach with their emphasis on Luke as a theologian, or vice-versa.

<sup>85</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled "Supernatural Religion"*, London, Macmillan, 1889, 23-26.

<sup>86</sup> Entire generations of British scholars have continued to be influenced by the historically oriented criticism that was pioneered by Lightfoot. To narrow our examples down we begin by F.F. Bruce, whose main point lies in his strictly historical approach. He was convinced that Acts should be studied



This may perhaps be explained by the fact that the early British New Testament critics were not primarily theologians, but rather historians, philologists, and archaeologists. For example, W.M. Ramsay, one of the most influential proponents of the historical value of Acts, was a classicist turned biblical scholar, like F.F. Bruce after him.

A.N. Sherwin-White's research is perhaps the most important of all recent studies on the problem of history in Acts.<sup>87</sup> As a Roman historian, he concludes that, when tested by the criteria of historical criticism, the essential historicity of the narrative of Acts is beyond any serious doubt. His approach was carried further by C.J. Hemer,<sup>88</sup> R.P.C. Hanson,<sup>89</sup> M. Hengel,<sup>90</sup> and others. I.H. Marshall is of the view that, thanks to the works of these scholars, we are now in a better position to affirm the essential reliability of Acts.<sup>91</sup>

F.F. Bruce, who approaches Luke-Acts from a classicist background, is of the view that "of all NT writers, Luke is the only one who merits the title 'historian'".<sup>92</sup> For this reason, Bruce is of the opinion that Acts should be studied in the context of the larger world of historical research, from which perspective it can clearly be

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in the context of the larger world of historical research, and that, taken from this particular perspective, the book of Acts has shown itself to be an essentially accurate piece of historical writing. In a position that was later to be adopted by Gasque, Bruce acknowledges that Luke does leave out some significant details in his historical writing, but Bruce stresses the accuracy of what is reported. C.S.C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, London, Black, 1957; I.H. Marshall (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1992) and others are in agreement with Bruce and those before him on the general historical trustworthiness of Luke.

<sup>87</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1963. In spite of the fact that, as Sherwin-White observes, Luke-Acts is liable to distortion, when it comes to matters of geography, Roman politics, law, and administration, "the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming", (:189).

<sup>88</sup> C.J. Hemer, "Luke the Historian", *BJRL* (60), 28-51. In his work, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1990), in which he goes over archaeological material and relates it to Acts, Hemer finds that, in matters of background, Acts is remarkably accurate. Hemer's conclusion is that Luke is, in reality, much more historically reliable than he is often given credit for, (:101-220).

<sup>89</sup> R.P.C. Hanson, *The Acts in the Revised Standard Version: With Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford Clarendon, 1967, 2-21.

<sup>90</sup> M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, London, Xpress Reprints, 1979. Hengel finds that a number of small and apparently insignificant details about the Roman world as described in Acts are confirmed by Josephus (:39). G. Lüdemann (*Das frühe Christentum nach den Traditionen der Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) has also made a strong contribution to the debate in favour of Luke-Acts' historical reliability. However, Lüdemann does submit that while Acts contains numerous historically provable facts, the book is sometimes misleading in its chronology.

<sup>91</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Acts*, 36-37.

<sup>92</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 27.

demonstrated that Acts is essentially an accurate piece of historical writing.<sup>93</sup> While the historical nature of Luke's writings is evident in the Gospel (especially in the prologue, in which Luke makes it clear that he intends to write history, which he does partly by setting the gospel story in the context of world history – for example in Luke 1:5; 2:1-2) as well as in Acts, it is, according to Bruce, "in Acts rather than in his 'former treatise' that Luke is recognizable as a Hellenistic historian".<sup>94</sup> Bruce goes to great lengths to vindicate Luke as a writer of history whose testimony is beyond reproach.<sup>95</sup>

The position of I.H. Marshall regarding the question of the historical value of Luke-Acts has not changed much since his 1968 article, "Recent Study of the Gospel According to St. Luke".<sup>96</sup> Though the article surveys Lucan scholarship since 1953, according to which all important works in the field are a response to H. Conzelmann's *Die Mitte der Zeit*,<sup>97</sup> Marshall, who considered Conzelmann's work to be a radically critical approach, mainly concentrates on his conviction about the historical trustworthiness of Luke. It may be instructive to let him speak for himself:-<sup>98</sup>

Was Luke, then, a reliable historian of the ministry of Jesus, or has he allowed his creative theological and literary powers to carry him away? May we agree with

<sup>93</sup> A position supported by G.A. Krodel (*Acts*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), who, in agreement with most interpreters, claims that "Luke was and endeavored to be a biblical historian intent on updating biblical history... Luke the historian wanted to write history and not fiction" (:40-41). Perhaps here Krodel takes a swipe at R.I. Pervo (*Profit With Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987), who regards Acts as a historical novel. In other words, even though the work may, according to Pervo, contain some historical information, it is primarily intended to entertain and to edify. For a similar perspective on the matter, see also S.P. and M.J. Schiering, "The Influence of the Ancient Romances on the Acts of the Apostles", *CB* 54 (1978), 81-88.

<sup>94</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> According to Gasque, Bruce relied on the historical insights and discoveries of renowned historians of his time, such as W.M. Ramsay's *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, in which Ramsay discovered Acts 14 to be meticulously accurate in respect of its professed historical setting. "This, in turn, led him to ask the further question: If the author of Acts proves to be carefully accurate in a matter of one detail, would it not be likely that he would prove to be the same in regard to others?" (*History*, 137). Another historian on whom Bruce based his own views regarding the historical accuracy of Luke-Acts was A.N. Sherwin-White whose research led him to the conclusion that, in his writings, Luke accurately reflects the conditions of the middle decades of the first century C.E. Sherwin-White cites numerous instances of direct correspondence between what is written in Acts and the historically provable facts of the time, such as, for example, those cited in Acts 23:2,33, 34-35; 24:2,3; 25:1-27. According to Sherwin-White, these and other events (some of which are stated in incidental statements), fit the historical facts perfectly and show Luke's remarkable accuracy as a historian in his references to contemporary events. See further the development of Bruce's own point of view in *Acts*, 27-34.

<sup>96</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Recent Study of the Gospel According to St. Luke", *ExpTim* 80 (1968), 4-8.

<sup>97</sup> Published in English translation in 1961 as *The Theology of St. Luke*.

<sup>98</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Recent Study", 7.

Professor Barrett when he says that it need not be doubted that Luke was an honest man, who would not in cold blood distort the truth or say that things had happened when he knew that they had not happened?... Since Luke makes it plain that he was concerned with *asphaleia*, we have a right to expect from him a higher degree of reliability than we would expect from a historian who was concerned more with rhetoric and literary effect.

The most recent study of Luke's legal and political references,<sup>99</sup> especially in Acts, has shown that the excessive skepticism of the commentaries by E. Haenchen (1957 and later) and H. Conzelmann (1963) is quite unwarranted.

...we are able to check Luke's use of his sources which he has indisputably taken from Mark, and it emerges that for the most part his alterations are stylistic; the degree of material change, especially when the teaching of Jesus is quoted, is much less than is sometimes supposed. It is reasonable to suppose that Luke used his other sources equally responsibly.<sup>100</sup>

Marshall is probably one of the most enduring upholders of the historical trustworthiness of Luke-Acts, at least among modern scholars. Neither the passage of time, nor advancement in scholarly debate has succeeded in displacing him from his original position. In his recently reprinted *Acts* (1998), which argues even more strongly for the historical reliability of Acts, he makes the observation that a reader of the Acts of the Apostles who expects to find in it a reliable history of the early church will not be disappointed. Indeed, the reader will find in Acts a "piece of history told with conscious artistry".<sup>101</sup> Of all the evangelists, Luke is, according to Marshall, the most conscious of writing as a historian. Even though he may purport to put across a theological interpretation of the story of Jesus, his vehicle for doing so is very consciously the historical one.<sup>102</sup>

Away from the British scene, other scholars have also, through independent study and research, arrived at the conclusion that Luke-Acts is not only a historical monograph, but also a *bios* (biography). In a way, R. Morgenthauer provides an answer to the question, whether what is artistic or literary in form cannot *ipso facto* be historical at the same time.<sup>103</sup> Morgenthauer attempts to do justice to both the literary and artistic

<sup>99</sup> Marshall here makes reference to the works of R.P.C. Hanson, *The Acts in the Revised Standard Version: With Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1967.

<sup>100</sup> Here, Marshall refers, as an example, to the passages in which Matthew and Luke agree almost word for word.

<sup>101</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Acts*, 17-18.

<sup>102</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978, 35. For Krodel, too, Luke uses history as a vehicle for theological expression: "Luke's theological aim may not detract from the mass of accurate historical detail which he provided in Acts". Luke "rewrote historical data in the interest of his theological aim" (*Acts*, 41).

<sup>103</sup> Gasque, *History*, 266.

as well as the historical aspects of Luke-Acts.<sup>104</sup> According to him, it is important to take seriously Luke's statement in his preface that he is concerned to write history.

Another non-British scholar convinced of the historical reliability of Luke-Acts is E. Trocmé.<sup>105</sup> He believes that Luke was a historian as well as an evangelist.

Yet another scholar convinced of the historical reliability of Luke-Acts was the Danish scholar J. Munck, whose position was that Acts, especially, is essentially trustworthy in its narration of the course of early Christian history. Luke, according to Munck, did not invent either the speeches or the incidents, but made constant use of traditional material.<sup>106</sup> Following J. Jervell,<sup>107</sup> Munck challenged the assumption (of such as Dibelius, Haenchen, Conzelmann, and others of that school) that the early Christians had no interest in their own history.<sup>108</sup>

A.J. Mattill, who has studied the problem of the historical value of Acts at some length and depth, has no hesitation in affirming the general historical reliability of Acts and the picture it gives of early Christianity. According to him, the book of Acts should be treated as any other historical monograph.<sup>109</sup>

A different perspective on the debate about Luke as a historian begins to emerge with J.A. Fitzmyer. Though Luke has called his account neither a *ἱστορία*, nor an *εὐαγγέλιον*, he has called it a *διήγησις*, which, for Fitzmyer, relates it, albeit in a generic way, to historiography. It is a fact that Luke has indeed historicized the Jesus event more than any other New Testament writer, but rather than the modern reader remaining sceptical as to the historical reliability of Luke, the only realistic answer to the question, in Fitzmyer's view, should be a frank "We do not know".<sup>110</sup> He points to historical writers of roughly the same period as Luke (for example Polybius and Plutarch, Josephus and Tacitus), and notes that even they, respected as they are as

<sup>104</sup> See his treatment of the matter in R. Morgenthaler, *Die lukanische Geschichtsschreibung als Zeugnis*, Zürich, Zwingli, 1949, 14-15.

<sup>105</sup> E. Trocmé, *Le Livre des Actes et l'histoire*, Paris, Presses universitaires, 1957.

<sup>106</sup> J. Munck, *Acts*, XLI-XLIV.

<sup>107</sup> J. Jervell, "Zur Frage der Traditionsgrundlage der Apostelgeschichte", *ST* 16 (1963), 25-41.

<sup>108</sup> J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1967, XXXIX.

<sup>109</sup> A.J. Mattill, *Luke as a Historian in Criticism since 1840*, unpublished dissertation, 1959, 47-84, 169-206, 297-314.

<sup>110</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 17.



historians, are sometimes criticized in terms of the historical (in)accuracy of some of their information.<sup>111</sup> Fitzmyer sees the Lucan historical perspective transcending the mere question of historicity, because in relating Luke 1:1-4 to Acts 1:1,8, it becomes evident that Luke-Acts professes to be basically a work of edification.<sup>112</sup> As he says,

Since Luke's is a form of historical writing laced with a concern for religious guarantee, proclamation, and didactic, it may well fit into categories of ancient literary writing but fail to live up to the standards of modern historiography. This is admitted today among many interpreters of the Lucan writings.<sup>113</sup>

While Fitzmyer's own position appears to be inclined towards the 'Luke-as-historian' approach, and while he may not be convinced that the picture painted about the historical value of Luke-Acts is as negative as some scholars make it out to be, he nevertheless is more accommodating of differing views than other scholars of the same persuasion. While Fitzmyer acknowledges the significance of the historical aspects of Luke's writings, he does not make them an end in themselves. For him, history is ultimately at the service of Luke's theological purpose:

the historical key in which Luke has played down the kerygma in his writings has a theological and apologetic purpose, even if the latter may not yet be the main purpose of Acts.<sup>114</sup>

One cannot speak of the historical reliability of Luke-Acts without briefly touching upon the question of the prologue to Luke's work, a part of the Lucan corpus that has attracted a lot of scholarly debate.<sup>115</sup> It has often been demonstrated that Luke's prologue follows the conventions employed by professional Hellenistic writers,

<sup>111</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-LX*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> E. Haenchen, *Acts*, 103. In another place Haenchen says: "By telling the history of apostolic times through many individual stories, the book primarily intends to edify the churches and thereby contribute its part in spreading the Word of God farther and farther, even to the ends of the earth", as quoted by Gasque, (*History*, 304).

<sup>113</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-LX*, 15-16.

<sup>114</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New York, Doubleday, 1998, 58.

<sup>115</sup> See, among others, the following works on the historical basis of Luke's prologue: F.O. Fearghail, *The Introduction to Luke-Acts: A Study of the Role of Lk 1,1-4*, 44 in *the Composition of Luke's Two-Volume Work*, Roma, Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991; J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, 33-46; D.L. Bock, *Luke 1:1 - 9:50*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1994, 51-67; H.-J. Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 2000, 3-4; F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 28-30; R.L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*, London, SCM Press, 1979, 32-33; L.C.A. Alexander, "Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing" in *NovT* 28 (1986), 48-74; I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1992, 39-44; F.J. Foakes-Jackson & K. Lake, (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. II, London, Macmillan, 1920-1933, 489-510; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-LX*, 14-18.

especially in historical monographs. F.F. Bruce defends those who treat Luke as a historian of antiquity and rebukes as "unwise" those who dismiss this position:

Philipp Vielhauer no doubt spoke for others when he said that Meyer, "who approaches Acts with the presuppositions of a historian of antiquity and treats it with the greatest confidence, misunderstands the nature of its accounts and the way in which they are connected." To speak thus of another scholar's presuppositions is unwise...Moreover, the presuppositions of a historian of antiquity are not unhelpful when it comes to evaluating the historical quality of a work like Acts...<sup>116</sup>

Bruce then proceeds to defend Luke's historical reliability on the similarity between Luke's prologue and the Hellenistic prologues of his time. He also draws attention to the fact that Luke, unlike the other evangelists, "sets the gospel story in a context of world history – referring, e.g., to the Emperors and Tiberius by name (Lk. 2:1; 3:1)."<sup>117</sup> This approach, says Bruce, is used to an "appreciably greater degree in [Luke's] second volume".

For F.O. Fearghail, Luke's prologue (which Fearghail refers to as "proemium") makes the rest of Luke-Acts basically historical.<sup>118</sup> The motifs found in Luke's *proemium*, says Fearghail, are

typical of, if not exclusive to, the proemia of ancient historical works. The presence of so many in such a brief proemium weighs heavily in favour of it introducing an historical work.<sup>119</sup>

D.L. Bock discusses Luke's prologue at some length in his commentary on the Third Gospel, in which he shows that Luke is to be classified among ancient writers of history. However, unlike other writers of ancient history, Luke's writing is "virtually contemporary to the events he describe".<sup>120</sup> In any case, argues Bock, if Luke's purpose was to offer his readers assurance (ἀσφάλεια) about the instruction they had received, and he does so through a careful presentation of the facts as he understood them, we should then be compelled to

<sup>116</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 27-28.

<sup>117</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 27.

<sup>118</sup> Fearghail bases himself on the collection of *proemia* of A. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought: From Homer to the Age of Heraclius*, New York, Mentor, 1952, 29ff.

<sup>119</sup> F.O. Fearghail *The Introduction to Luke-Acts*, 167.

<sup>120</sup> D.L. Bock, *Luke 1:1 – 9:50*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1994, 67.



question the morals of a writer who believes in a religion that stresses the telling of the truth, and who yet misrepresents the history he describes.<sup>121</sup>

The proponents of the position that Luke-Acts is historically reliable have used various arguments in support of this position. Of particular interest to this group of scholars has been the archaeological and inscriptional evidence that has emerged over the years from various sites scattered throughout what was the Roman Empire during and shortly after the First Century, and the relationship of the archaeological evidence to Luke-Acts.

On the understanding that Luke-Acts is "the most Hellenistic book of the New Testament",<sup>122</sup> (an argument also used in placing Luke's prologue, and indeed the entire work, in the literary tradition of the most exalted Hellenistic historians), many have sought to base their belief in the historical reliability of Luke-Acts more on the Hellenistic data that either proved Luke-Acts to be generally historically reliable, or that Luke-Acts sets the social environment that provides the reader with the background necessary for the understanding of the narrative. There are, however, not a few scholars who hold the same view, namely that Luke-Acts is historically reliable, on the basis of their research on the Roman world of the First Century C.E.<sup>123</sup>

Since the evidence adduced for the historical reliability of Acts comes, basically, in two archaeological forms, namely material or structural findings and from inscriptions, it is not an altogether unhelpful exercise to consider briefly some of the archaeological evidence that the proponents of "Luke-as-historian" have put forward

<sup>121</sup> D.L. Bock, *Luke*, 67.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction*, Kampen, Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994, 166. Part III of this book (:165-202), which deals extensively and in great detail with the "unknown god" of Acts 17:23, is especially informative regarding the common phenomenon of an altar erected to an ἄγνωστος θεός in a number of Hellenistic cities. Van der Horst cites further evidence, garnered from an impressive selection of ancient and classical sources as well as patristic writings, and comes to the conclusion that "Luke, in making Paul take his starting point in an altar-inscription, makes use of a well-known literary device which can be illustrated by other examples from Luke's time" (:97).

<sup>123</sup> One thinks here of the work of K.P. Donfried & P. Richardson ([eds.], *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), which, though dealing mostly with the position of the Jews in First Century Rome itself, holds a wealth of archaeological and epigraphic information that is echoed, by extension, in the environment of most urban centres mentioned in Luke-Acts. The chapters on "The Interaction of Jews with Non-Jews in Rome" (:60-90) and "Roman Policy toward the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E." (:93-116) help to situate texts like Acts 18:2 within a historically datable context.

as supporting their position. In doing this we also keep in mind Gasque's criticism that "the defenders of 'Luke the historian' have seldom been given a fair hearing".<sup>124</sup>

Even though Luke, who did careful research before writing (1:1-4), wrote more as a theologian than a historian, W.M. Ramsay was intrigued with proving Luke's historical trustworthiness and spent many years in the Mediterranean world in an effort to vindicate the accuracy of Luke-Acts as history and geography.<sup>125</sup> The weakness of Ramsay's approach was basically a weakness in method: he undertook his archaeological investigations already convinced of the historical and geographical reliability of Luke-Acts before he had found the evidence necessary to uphold that position. So, rather than beginning from objective data gathered from his archaeological excavations and *then* relating them to the text of Luke-Acts, Ramsay started from the questionable *a priori* position that Luke-Acts was historically reliable and what he wrote could be supported by archaeology. This methodology obviously runs the danger of the manipulation or misinterpretation of the archaeological data, so that it can be tailored to fit the text of Luke-Acts.

However, Ramsay was not altogether unaware of the weaknesses inherent in his methodology. For example, there were instances when he did not always work from text to archaeology (as it were to prove Luke-Acts right), but from archaeology to text (where, for instance, the archaeological data did not always agree with, or support the text). A case in point was when Ramsay rejected the identification of the silversmith Demetrius of Acts 19:24 with another Demetrius whose name was found, together with the description that he was a *νεωποίης* (literally meaning 'shrine-maker'), in an inscription found in Ephesus.<sup>126</sup> Ramsay also argued on grammatical grounds, for the expression used by Luke in describing Demetrius' occupation as *ἀργυροκόπος* (literally meaning 'silversmith').<sup>127</sup>

<sup>124</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> See his *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), in which Ramsay maintains a position made in an earlier work, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1908).

<sup>126</sup> Ramsay's rejection of the theory that Demetrius the *νεωποίης*, whose name and trade-description was found in an inscription found during an archaeological excavation in Ephesus, did not refer to Demetrius the silversmith of Acts, 19 is argued in his *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1903, 112-145).

<sup>127</sup> For a brief treatment of the uses of *ἀργυροκόπος* and *νεωποίης* see F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 415. See also A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Baker

In a detailed study on Acts 17:23's reference to an ἄγνωστω θεῷ van der Horst proves conclusively from epigraphic evidence going back to the Second Century C.E. – in which, writing his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias deals at some length with “altars of gods named Unknown”<sup>128</sup> erected in the various harbours of Athens – that the background to Paul's Areopagus speech rests on solid historical ground. Noting, however, that both epigraphic and archaeological evidence (of which van der Horst has numerous examples)<sup>129</sup> always speaks of “Unknown gods” in the plural (whereas it is in the singular in Acts 17:23), which raises the question as to whether Luke deliberately changed an existing altar-inscription in the plural into the singular in order to make it usable for his purpose, van der Horst remarks that this was possibly a de-paganization, by Luke, of the original Greek wording since, as van der Horst says: “Christians frequently adapt texts of pagan origin in order to make them accord with Christian monotheism”.<sup>130</sup> Van der Horst is supported by P. Canivert who, commenting on the same phenomenon (the change from plural to singular), notes how, when quoting from Plato, Plotinus, and others, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (Fifth Century C.E.) changes θεοί to θεός.

Van der Horst concludes by saying that

If one assumes that Luke changed the plural ‘unknown gods’ into a singular, he can be shown to have followed a procedure that was employed in a variety of forms in both early Jewish and early Christian writings when pagan material had to be made palatable.<sup>131</sup>

Whatever direction the grammatical or syntactical argument regarding Luke's use of ἄγνωστω θεῷ in Acts 17:24 may take, he has, according to van der Horst, Canivert and others, based Paul's Areopagus speech on solidly provable historical fact.

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Book House, 1963, 91-92; G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, North Ryde, Macquarie University, 1979, 4, §1, where he talks of Ephesian silversmiths, one of whom was a νεωποίης.

<sup>128</sup> As quoted by P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity*, 168.

<sup>129</sup> See P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity*, 165-202.

<sup>130</sup> P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity*, 198.

<sup>131</sup> P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity*, 199.

Among the most respected researches into the historical value of Acts is the one by J. Dupont.<sup>132</sup> He concludes his study of the 'we' passages with the observation that "the author wishes it to be understood that he has personally taken part in the events he is recounting".<sup>133</sup> In other words, we can rely on the historical veracity of Luke-Acts since the writer was a witness to the events he narrates.

In general, it may be noted that where archaeologists need extra-archaeological evidence (especially in literary form) to explain the significance of their findings they tend to find more parallels or points of confluence between their data and the writings of ancient historians or, from a scriptural perspective, more frequently in Luke-Acts than in other New Testament writings. From an archaeological point of view, therefore, Luke-Acts is the most studied work and provides the most frequently referenced background for the interpretation of archaeological data. The amount of information gleaned from Luke-Acts that has shed light on archaeological findings and their significance in the world of their time is not equalled by any other New Testament writing. This may perhaps explain why so many writers base their argument for the historical reliability of Luke-Acts on archaeological evidence.<sup>134</sup>

As we come to the conclusion of this brief survey of scholars who view Luke as a historian, one more observation may be in order, namely that it is striking to note how the investigation of the historical value of Luke-Acts in recent years has been undertaken not only by people who are exegetes, but increasingly by scholars of classical and ancient history,<sup>135</sup> and archaeology.<sup>136</sup> In other words, Luke-Acts has entered squarely into the scientific arena, and has been studied from political,<sup>137</sup>

<sup>132</sup> J. Dupont, *The Sources of Acts: The Present Position*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1964.

<sup>133</sup> J. Dupont, *The Sources of Acts*, 167.

<sup>134</sup> Such, for example, is the case with J. McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1991; K.A Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1977; E. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, Philadelphia, J.B., Lippincott, 1978; A. Millard, *Discoveries from Bible Times*, Oxford, Lion Publishing Plc., 1997.; J.T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1963; G.E. Wright, 1960, *An Introduction to Biblical Archaeology*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1961, among others.

<sup>135</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 250-251.

<sup>136</sup> For example, W.M. Ramsay, "the foremost authority of his day on the topography, antiquities, and history of Asia Minor in ancient times", as quoted from J.G.C. Anderson in *DNB* 1931-1940, (:727), by W.W. Gasque, *History*, 136.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, the collection of articles in R.J. Cassidy & P.J. Scharper (eds.), *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*. Cassidy's own *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1987) has received a glowing review from I.H. Marshall (among a number of other scholars – see back cover of book) as a work that adds a "new dimension to the purpose of Acts by suggesting that Luke



sociological and socio-cultural,<sup>138</sup> and even from economic perspectives.<sup>139</sup> Luke-Acts has even broken into the literary arts and dramatic sciences.<sup>140</sup> All these perspectives are treated below.

Finally (which is by no means to say that we have exhausted the survey on the historical value of Acts), we come to the most recent proponents of the view that Luke-Acts is historically reliable. To this end we begin with W.W. Gasque who, in spite of (or perhaps in justification of) J. Fitzmyer's assessment that he "has an exaggerated concern for the historical worth of Acts",<sup>141</sup> makes no bones about the fact that he sides "completely with the defenders of Luke as a historian".<sup>142</sup> In making this assertion, Gasque is however by no means unaware that a substantial section of scholarship is not with him in his views. Indeed, his survey of a century and a half of Lucan criticism generally proceeds by way of presenting a clear review of the opposing views, only to show up the weakness of their positions before he gives what he believes to be the best argument. At the end of his impressive survey, and despite his own strong conviction on the positive evaluation of Luke as a historian, Gasque nonetheless comes to the unavoidable conclusion that "there is no general agreement among scholars on even the most basic issues of Lucan research".<sup>143</sup> He extends his assessment to the textual criticism of Acts, about which

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wanted to show Christians how to live in the Roman Empire and specifically to give them examples of how to cope with being tried before political officials".

<sup>138</sup> See the various articles in J.H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), which cover areas of social psychology, social institutions, and social dynamics. P.F. Esler's *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), also makes extensive use of sociology and anthropology to examine the theology of Luke-Acts. B. Witherington's commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), adds a different dimension to Lucan studies, taking seriously as it does all dimensions of Luke's work: historical, social, rhetorical, and theological.

<sup>139</sup> P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 164-197.

<sup>140</sup> A good example is seen in D. Rhoads & K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, especially in the section "Characters in the Making: Individuality and Ideology in the Gospels" (:48-72), and, in a special way, in the section that deals directly with Luke-Acts: "Characterization and Persuasion: The Rich Man and the Poor Man in Luke 16:19-31", (:73-105). See also C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet: Die Charakterzeichnung Johannes des Täufers im lukanischen Erzählwerk*, Freiburg, Herder, 2001, especially pages 59-71. In a different context, R.I. Pervo (*Profit with Delight*, 11), sets out to demonstrate the pervasiveness of *entertainment* in Luke's writings. According to Pervo, Luke was in reality not the writer of the learned treatise that scholarship has credited him with, but rather one of the 'popular' writers "not always concerned to follow the rules laid down by their cultured betters, who sneered at the notion of lowbrow history". Luke, rather, uses the art of (narrative) entertainment to put his message across.

<sup>141</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 50.

<sup>142</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 274.

<sup>143</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 305.

he also maintains, like A.F.J. Klijn, that there seems to be no general agreement among scholars.<sup>144</sup> We will see later that the situation, at least in this particular respect, has changed somewhat since the days of Gasque and Klijn.

Regarding the purpose of Acts, Gasque strikes his most pessimistic note yet:

If anything has been learned from our study, it is that it is impossible to isolate one exclusive purpose or theological idea which is the key to the interpretation of the Third Gospel and Acts.<sup>145</sup>

If this is true of the *purpose* of Luke-Acts, we are nowhere nearer the truth in respect of the *sources* that Luke used for his work. J. Dupont who has carefully studied the source-critical aspects of Acts comes to the realistic conclusion that

Despite the most careful and detailed research, it has not been possible to define any of the sources used by the author of Acts in a way which will meet with widespread agreement among the critics.<sup>146</sup>

However, even in the face of the somewhat negative assessments, scholars (for example Gasque) do not believe that the student of Luke-Acts should throw his hands up in despair and give up his study of so rich a literary creation in the New Testament. Rather, the student should feel compelled to study the documents for himself, test all the critical theories, and arrive at his own first-hand conclusions.<sup>147</sup>

### ***1.3 Historical Approaches to John the Baptist***

The question of the historicity of Luke-Acts raises, in its turn, the question of the historicity of the characters that people Luke's narrative. For example, did such a character as John the Baptist actually exist, or was he merely a literary creation of the author?

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<sup>144</sup> In this rather discouraging observation Gasque is supported by A.F.J. Klijn, whose own assessment of the situation regarding Lucan textual criticism is that "there has never been so little agreement about the nature of the original text as at this moment", as quoted by Gasque, *History*, 305.

<sup>145</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 308. Gasque is supported in this position by W.G. Kümmel, (*Introduction to the New Testament*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1975) who also maintains that "the large number of well-grounded proposals concerning the purpose of the book [of Acts] make it questionable whether an unequivocal answer to this question [of purpose] is possible" (:115).

<sup>146</sup> J. Dupont, *The Sources of Acts*, 166.

<sup>147</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 305.



G. Yamasaki has noted how "the history of research on John the Baptist has run on a parallel track to the development of research on Jesus",<sup>148</sup> and has further noted how the 'Quest of the Historical John the Baptist' has developed along the 'Quest of the Historical Jesus'.<sup>149</sup> J.E. Taylor, who sought to end John the Baptist's isolation by providing him with a context that would show that "John was very much a Jew of his time", who is therefore "to be understood within the context of Second Temple Judaism, not formative Christianity",<sup>150</sup> is somewhat sceptical of the perception that "John would not be very significant historically if he had not had some contact with Jesus".<sup>151</sup> In other words, it is possible to retrieve John's historical and separate individuality from the merely honorary position so far accorded to him in the pursuit of the historical Jesus.

The question of the historicity of John the Baptist cannot be separated from the larger question of the historicity of the Gospels in general, a question given currency by the deism of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries C.E. This period of history saw, through the influence of deism, the rejection of the supernatural in the Gospel narratives, and long-held dogmatic positions in respect of Jesus came into question. Critical paradigm shifts from Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels to the historical Jesus gained currency in critical scholarship. The works of scholars like D.F. Strauss<sup>152</sup> and A. Schweitzer<sup>153</sup> set in motion the investigation of the historicity question. Generally, for Strauss, the Gospel accounts of the stories about Jesus are mythical, though there might be isolated bits of historical material. Among such snippets of history, according to Strauss, are (a) there was a historical figure by the name of John, a baptizer in the tradition of Jewish religious lustrations;<sup>154</sup> (b) among those baptized by John was Jesus, a follower and disciple of John whom, however, John did not believe to be the Messiah;<sup>155</sup> (c) after John's death, Jesus carried on the work of John

<sup>148</sup> G. Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death: Audience-Oriented Criticism of Matthew's Narrative*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, 12.

<sup>149</sup> G. Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death*, 12.

<sup>150</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 317.

<sup>151</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 2.

<sup>152</sup> D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972.

<sup>153</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede*, New York, Macmillan, 1968.

<sup>154</sup> D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 215.

<sup>155</sup> D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 219-229.

with a few modifications.<sup>156</sup> This much, according to Strauss, is the historical core around which the mythical rest is woven.

For our present purposes we will note that, certainly within the context of Luke-Acts, Josephus, and other extra-canonical literature, the historicity of John the Baptist has not been seriously questioned by modern critical scholarship. Indeed, quite recently claims have been made to the effect that the cave in which John the Baptist lived has been discovered by archaeologists. In 1999 Shimon Gibson and James Tabor excavated a cave near Ain-Karim, west of Jerusalem, about which Gibson proclaimed:

I am now quite certain that this cave was connected with the ancient cult of John the Baptist. Indeed, this may very well be *the* cave of the early years of John's life, the place where he sought his first solitude in the 'wilderness' and the place where he first practised his baptism procedures.<sup>157</sup>

The extant sources for a possible profile of John the Baptist (the New Testament, the extra-canonical Gospels, and Josephus) all offer indirect information. Some scholars have noted, indeed, that the extant written sources "say more about the commentators themselves than about John."<sup>158</sup> For all that, however, we are not altogether without reasonable grounds to believe that John the Baptist was indeed a historical figure around the First Century C.E., and that he lived in Palestine. J.A. Fitzmyer has noted "That Jesus and John the Baptist were figures of ancient history is not an issue and is not doubted."<sup>159</sup> Fitzmyer, however, cautions on the need to draw a clear distinction between the historical John the Baptist (or Jesus) and the John the Baptist (or Jesus) of history.<sup>160</sup>

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus mentions John the Baptist in Book XVIII of his *Antiquities of the Jews*. He also mentions Jesus, but does not relate the one to the other. In his description of the relationship between John the Baptist and Herod

<sup>156</sup> D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 233.

<sup>157</sup> S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist: The Stunning Archaeological Discovery That Has Redefined Christian History*, New York, Doubleday, 2002, 2. The subtitle of Gibson's book is a somewhat inappropriate claim for a work that has yet to undergo the rigors of critical analysis and prove its standing in scholarship.

<sup>158</sup> S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, 2.

<sup>159</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1989, 88.

<sup>160</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 88-99.

Antipas,<sup>161</sup> Josephus at the very least bears witness not just to the existence of John and his ministry, but also provides a contemporary assessment and estimation of John as “a good man [who] exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God”.

The investigation of the members of the *Jesus Seminar* into the historicity of John the Baptist has led the members to the conclusion that

John appeared in the wilderness, the desert area astride the Jordan River and bordering the Dead Sea to the south. Separated by river and sea, the territories of Judea and Perea apparently served as the principal, if not exclusive, locale of his public activity.<sup>162</sup>

The basic position of the members of the *Jesus Seminar*, which also serves as the point of departure for their investigation into the historicity of John's activities, lies in their conviction that John baptized Jesus. In their words: “It could be said with certainty that John had baptized Jesus.”<sup>163</sup> To indicate the level of certainty attached to this statement the members of the seminar voted to colour it red in their unique way of determining the high historical probability of a statement or action reported in the Gospel narrative.<sup>164</sup>

Also “not at issue” in a historical consideration of John the Baptist and his ministry is the existence of a movement (or, perhaps more accurately, movements) associated with him or believed to have been founded by him. In Acts 18-19 we learn of John's baptism being continued by his disciples as far afield as Ephesus in Asia Minor. E. Lupieri has noted reference made in the Sixth Century C.E. to a persecuted group of some “Saint John Christians” or “Mandaeans” who revered John the Baptist in the Turkish empire. We will return to this point below. Suffice it for now to note that the historicity of John the Baptist and his ministry and a movement in some way associated with him are indeed not doubted.

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<sup>161</sup> *Ant.* xviii.116-119.

<sup>162</sup> W.B. Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar*, Sonoma, Polebridge Press, 1994, 19.

<sup>163</sup> W.B. Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus*, 9.

<sup>164</sup> See the *Jesus Seminar's* description of its *modus operandi* in W.B. Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus*, 1-14.

## 2. LUKE THE THEOLOGIAN

### 2.1 *Luke as a Theologian*

In two of the literature surveys that we have cited above, namely the one by Gasque and the other by Bovon, it will have sufficiently emerged, we hope, that Gasque was a convinced 'Luke-as-historian' scholar. In reviewing Mattill's study of the problem of the historical value of Acts, Gasque says:

Mattill's position concerning the question of history in Acts would be roughly equivalent to the view of the present author, though he would be a little more hesitant than I have been to side completely with the defenders of Luke as a historian.<sup>165</sup>

The other survey of research in Luke-Acts to appear in the last few decades was, as we have seen, F. Bovon's, *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-three years of research (1950-1983)*.

Bovon differs from Gasque in that he approaches Luke-Acts as a theological project of the author, and his position is immediately evident in the title he has given to his survey.

If the 'Luke-as-historian' camp can boast of the support of some of the biggest names in Lucan scholarship, the opposition has an equally (and perhaps even more) formidable arsenal.<sup>166</sup> For this latter camp, it is clear not only that Luke was a theologian, but one who deliberately used his sources and other materials at his disposal tendentiously and creatively to suit his theological purposes. Where the

<sup>165</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 274. Mattill himself, it may be noted, has no hesitation in affirming the general historical reliability of the narrative of Acts in the picture it gives of early Christian development. In *Luke as a Historian in Criticism since 1840* (1959), he pleads for the treatment of Acts not as a theological treatise, but as any other historical document. Though Gasque makes his 'Luke-as-historian' stance obvious throughout his *History*, he gives his clearest support for this position when he says: "My study of the history of criticism, as well as the narrative of the Book of Acts and the historical problems involved, has strengthened my conviction that those critics who rate the author as a reliable historian of early Christianity are essentially correct in their conclusions. Contrary to the impression given by some recent writers, this is not a minority opinion among scholars"; (:5). Other scholars, however, do not quite agree with Gasque on this last point, not to mention many others. See, for example, R.I. Pervo in *Profit with Delight*: "The concept of 'Luke the theologian' is an implicit heritage of the Tübingen school now accepted by the vast majority of scholars" (:2), or again, "Just why Acts is thought to be historiography is unclear...The notion that the Gospels are immanent, objective history has few contemporary adherents" (:4).

<sup>166</sup> Such names as Baur, Käsemann, Dibelius, Haenchen, Conzelmann, Roloff, Jervell. What is immediately striking is that these are the biggest names in modern German scholarship, although Baur could hardly be called 'modern'.

'Luke-as-historian' camp acknowledges the presence of some historical inconsistencies in Luke's work without always convincingly providing explanations for them, the scholars who view Luke as a theologian make capital of these same historical inaccuracies to buttress their own position that the writing of history was not Luke's primary pre-occupation, and that, where it suited his theological purposes, he twisted the facts of history by arbitrarily altering or even inventing new material.<sup>167</sup> Where the 'Luke-as-historian' camp has been at great pains to explain the discrepancies, for example, between Luke's Paul and the Paul of the Letters, for the 'Luke-the-theologian' scholars this has been merely another point of departure for the defence of their position. The discrepancies, they claim, are not so significant in and of themselves; rather what is significant is that they prove that Luke did not work as a historian but as a creative writer. Haenchen, for example, is of the view that Luke freely adapted his material for his theological purposes and did not feel under obligation to be strictly historical.<sup>168</sup> The problem of Paul is thus yet another indication of Luke's creative imagination as a theologian not fettered by the need for historical accuracy.

Many scholars are of the view that if we are rightly to speak of an emerging 'shift' in Lucan studies (that is to say, from viewing Luke as a historian, to seeing him as a theologian) we must go back to the 1950's, to H. Conzelmann who was one of the first to systematically study Luke-Acts from a theological perspective. He viewed Luke as a very capable and original theologian, an innovator who reworked the tradition he had received and the sources at his disposal according to a theological agenda he had consciously set for himself. Conzelmann was a true upholder of F.C. Baur's *Tendenzkritik*, about which see footnote 150 below.

Though the real catalyst in the development of this perspective (that is to say, Luke as a theologian) was R. Bultmann, his views were given their most definitive form by E. Käsemann, M. Dibelius, and H. Conzelmann – all descendants, adherents or associates of F.C. Baur's famous Tübingen school.<sup>169</sup> Though it was Baur himself

<sup>167</sup> The most prominent representatives of this school of thought are Dibelius and Haenchen.

<sup>168</sup> E. Haenchen, "Tradition und Komposition in der Apostelgeschichte", *ZTK* 52 (1955), 210-218.

<sup>169</sup> F.C. Baur, professor of theology at Tübingen in the nineteenth century, was the famed founder of the *Tübinger Schule* of New Testament criticism. Baur used the method which later came to be known as *Tendenzkritik* ('tendency criticism'), i.e. the study of New Testament writings in terms of the special theological viewpoint of the author or editor. Thus arose the suspicion (if not downright rejection) of the historical reliability of New Testament texts, especially of Luke-Acts, sometimes to the point where



who, on the basis of his critical method, set in motion the view that the book of Acts had little historical value,<sup>170</sup> it was left to Bultmann, Dibelius, and Conzelmann to ring the death-toll for the historical reliability of Luke-Acts when, with the aid of form- and redaction-criticism, they put forth the view that Luke had lost the original eschatological understanding of Jesus,<sup>171</sup> and replaced it with a theology of salvation history.

E. Käsemann developed Bultmann's view and also affirmed that Luke-Acts is marked by a loss of the original kerygmatic sense of the Jesus tradition.<sup>172</sup> Due to this loss, so argued Käsemann, Luke replaced primitive Christian eschatology (a major element of which was belief in the imminent Parousia) with salvation history.

E. Haenchen, one of the foremost scholars on Luke-Acts,<sup>173</sup> was more interested in the ongoing kerygmatic and apologetic mission of the early church in the time following Jesus' departure. According to Haenchen, it is in this uncomfortable void (uncomfortable, that is, for Luke and his community), that the seeds of Luke's theology are to be found.

It was H. Conzelmann who, with the aid of form-criticism, gave Bultmann's original view its fullest expression, especially in his *Theology of St. Luke* (1961). For Conzelmann, all of Lucan theology rests on the one key point: the delay of the Parousia and how to address this uncomfortable situation for the early Christians. In his article, "Shifting Sands: The Recent Study of the Gospel of Luke", Marshall gives a brief but very succinct review of Conzelmann's views as well as scholarship's not

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Luke was believed to have actually created, *ex nihilo*, some aspects of Jesus' life in order to meet the requirements of his theological purpose or tendency. In the post-Baur period, *Formgeschichte* ('form-criticism') was to be rigorously applied to the study of scripture in a whole new way. *Formgeschichte* attempts to get behind the written words to the oral tradition in the transmission of the Gospel materials. The goal is to determine, as far as possible, the *Sitz im Leben* of the individual pericopae. This has often led, in the hands of scholars like Bultmann, Dibelius, and others, to conclusions that are extremely skeptical of the historical foundations of the life and ministry of Jesus.

<sup>170</sup> See F.C. Baur in the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 15 (1841), cols. 369-375. Among other things, Baur judges Acts to be "keine objective, sondern nur eine durch ein subjectives Interesse alterirte Darstellung".

<sup>171</sup> See the section on "The Development toward the Ancient Church", in Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament II*, London, SCM Press Ltd (1955, 116-117).

<sup>172</sup> E. Käsemann, "Paul and Early Catholicism", in *New Testament Questions of Today*, 237, n.1.

<sup>173</sup> See E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1971), and his "The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity", in L. Keck & J.L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 258-278.



too sympathetic response to them.<sup>174</sup> H. Talbert delivers a telling caveat when he says:

Lukan studies in the last twenty years have been like shifting sands. At present, widespread agreement is difficult to find, except on the point that Conzelmann's synthesis is inadequate.<sup>175</sup>

But what, precisely, was Conzelmann's "synthesis"?

## 2.2 Hans Conzelmann

Briefly stated, Conzelmann's thesis is that the delay of the Parousia is the key to Luke's theology and plays a critical role for our general understanding of Luke-Acts. In order to explain this delay and fill in the void left by it, Conzelmann divides salvation history (or what he calls the *Heilsgeschichte*) into three distinct periods or stages: (1) the period of Israel which extends from creation to John the Baptist, (2) the period of Jesus from his baptism by John to his ascension, the period which, for Conzelmann, is the 'centre of time', and (3) the period of the church under tribulation (*ecclesia pressa*), which was the period from Jesus' ascension to his Parousia, an event that Conzelmann places at some distant and indeterminate future point. In this way, the delayed parousia ceases to be an issue both for Luke and for his community.

Conzelmann basically based his periodization of salvation history<sup>176</sup> on his interpretation of Luke 16:16 ("The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached...") which for him marked a clear temporal caesura (turning point) separating the time of Israel (up to John the Baptist) from the time of Jesus. If the combination of the words μέχρι Ἰωάννου and ἀπὸ τότε... are really taken to signify, in the mind of Luke, the separation of two periods, then Conzelmann's three-tiered view of history is in trouble, for the words in their

<sup>174</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Shifting Sands, *Int* 30 (1976), 381-395.

<sup>175</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Shifting Sands", 395. So also W.C. Robinson, *Der Weg des Herrn: Studien zur Geschichte und Eschatologie im Lukas-Evangelium*, Hamburg, H. Reich, 1964, and H. Flender, *Heil und Geschichte in der Theologie des Lukas*, München, Kaiser Verlag, 1965.

<sup>176</sup> Conzelmann was, in fact, not the originator of this picture of salvation history. He developed his thesis from the work of H. von Baer, (*Der heilige Geist in den Lukasschriften*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1926), in which the concept appears to have been put forward for the first time. The proposal has however been associated almost completely with Conzelmann because he was the first to systematically elaborate on it, and his book *Die Mitte der Zeit* (1953, 1957), translated into English as *The Theology of St. Luke* (1960) has probably generated more scholarly debate on the theology and purpose of Luke-Acts than any other.

context undoubtedly allude to two periods of salvation history: the time *up to* John the Baptist, and the time *after* him. This apparent absence of a third period of salvation history has brought Conzelmann under fire from scholars like W.G. Kümmel, C.H. Talbert, and F. Bovon,<sup>177</sup> to mention only a few. These scholars, with Kümmel leading, prefer to think of Luke's salvation history in two stages, namely a period of promise and a period of fulfillment. However, as other scholars have been quick to point out, promise and fulfillment are hardly unique to Luke-Acts: one finds promise and fulfillment in both Matthew and John.

Conzelmann is not as clear regarding where he draws the line separating the time of Jesus from the time of the church under stress. He appears to make the re-appearance of Satan, the beginning of the passion, as well as the Ascension the points of separation between the two periods of salvation history. In a sense, Conzelmann is forced by his own interpretation of Luke 22:3 ("Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve") to make the passion narrative the caesura between the time of Jesus and the time of the church, because the passion begins almost simultaneously with the end of the "Satan-free" period, and this is when Satan leads Judas to betray Jesus.

How does Conzelmann come to this conclusion?

According to Conzelmann, one of the distinctive characteristics about the period of Jesus is that it is "Satan-free". It is a period in which Satan is absent from the life of Jesus, his last appearance having been in Luke 4:13 ("When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time"). However, it is in Luke 22:3, very much during the period of Jesus, that Satan enters into Judas and makes him betray Jesus. Thus Conzelmann's interpretation of the presence or absence of Satan, and the significance of that fact, is surely not correct. The following statements represent some of the weaknesses of Conzelmann's thesis, and the rather clumsy way in which he situates the division between the period of Jesus and that of the church on the basis of the absence and later presence of Satan.

<sup>177</sup> See W.G. Kümmel, "Current Theological Accusations against Luke", *ANQ* 16 (1975), 131-145, particularly p. 137; "Promise and Fulfillment in Lucan Theology" in C.H. Talbert (ed.), *New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, New York, Crossroad, 1984, 91-103; F. Bovon, "Luc: Portrait et projet", *LumVie* 153-154 (1981), 9-19, particularly p. 13.

The temptation is finished (πάντα), and the devil departs. A question of principle is involved here, for it means that where Jesus is from now on, there Satan is no more - ἄχρι καιροῦ period free from Satan is now beginning, an epoch of a special kind in the centre of the whole course of redemptive history<sup>178</sup>

When Jesus was alive, was the time of salvation; Satan was far away, it was a time without temptation (cf. Luke iv, 13 with xxii, 3 and xxii, 35). Since the Passion, however, Satan is present again and the disciples of Jesus are again subject to temptation (xxii, 36)<sup>179</sup>

Between the 'Temptation' and Passion he [Satan] is absent, then he re-appears (Luke xxii, 3) and the 'temptations' are back again<sup>180</sup>

In, other words, Luke 4:13 marks the end of Satan's rule (the end of Jesus' temptations), and with Satan's re-appearance in Luke 22:3 a new period of temptation, a new epoch in the history of salvation begins. Thus, the end of the "Satan-free" period inaugurates a new page in the history of salvation.

Conzelmann's position becomes especially awkward when it is kept in mind that elsewhere in his book he speaks of the Ascension as the point of separation between the second period of salvation and the third.<sup>181</sup>

### 2.3 Responses to Conzelmann

Because it is not clear where Conzelmann places the second caesura that separates the time of Jesus from the time of the church under stress, some modern scholars who continue to regard Conzelmann's proposal as basically sound (with some adjustments in detail), have stepped into the breach and, like J.A. Fitzmyer,<sup>182</sup> have made a concerted attempt at identifying the second turning point in salvation history, even though Fitzmyer basically relies on what would appear to be an argument from silence:

one cannot ignore the further periodization that is implicit in Lucan thinking when one considers Acts as the sequel to the Third Gospel. Only Luke has composed such

<sup>178</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 28.

<sup>179</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 16.

<sup>180</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 156.

<sup>181</sup> In his enumeration of the three stages of salvation history, Conzelmann says of the third period (the period of the church) that it is: "The period since the Ascension, on earth the period of the *ecclesia pressa*, during which the virtue of patience is required...", *The Theology of St. Luke* (:16-17). He further says, "the Ascension does not form the conclusion of the first, but the beginning of the second volume of Luke's historical account" (:204).

<sup>182</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 158-159.

a sequel, and indeed with an explicit reference to a new period in the context of the ascension...<sup>183</sup>

According to Fitzmyer, therefore, the second turning point in the history of salvation that separates the time of Jesus from the time of the church under stress is to be seen especially in the fact that Luke presents the account of the ascension twice: Luke 24:50-52 and Acts 1:3-6.

In the view of Fitzmyer, Conzelmann understood this (the Ascension) as referring to the conclusion of one period, that of the prophets up to and including John the Baptist, and the beginning of another in which the central figure was Jesus. The fact remains, however, that Conzelmann is rather muddled on this point.

Another important point on which scholarship has not forgiven Conzelmann is his total exclusion of the infancy narrative (Luke 1-2) which he did not consider to be an integral part of the Gospel.<sup>184</sup> The voices against Conzelmann tended to be louder and more insistent than those in his favour, though some attempts were made at vindicating him on some points of his argument by scholars such as I.H. Marshall,<sup>185</sup> H.H. Oliver,<sup>186</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, W.B. Tatum,<sup>187</sup> and others who found no fault with the general scheme of Conzelmann's *Heilsgeschichte*. They attempted, instead, to make up for his exclusion of Luke 1-2 by trying to fit the birth narratives into Conzelmann's scheme. But is it possible, in any case, to talk of a period of salvation history that runs from creation to John the Baptist while some of the most crucial elements in the life of John the Baptist are ignored altogether? Can the story of Jesus, at least from the Lucan perspective, be told without the story of John? We will argue that the infancy narrative and John the Baptist, especially, play more integral roles in the Lucan writings than Conzelmann accords them.

<sup>183</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 62.

<sup>184</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 18, n.1; 75, n.4; 118; 172. Though Conzelmann (*The Theology of St. Luke*) does concede that there is "a strong argument in support of the view that the prologue formed an original part of the Gospel", he dismisses the infancy narrative: "we shall not discuss it" (:18, n.1), and "We are not taking the prologue into consideration here" (:22, n.2). See further, 24-25; 75, n.4; 72; 174, n.1; 193, n.5. Scholarship has in general crucified Conzelmann for this stance.

<sup>185</sup> Though he is critical of the details, for example in *Acts* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), Marshall accepts the major theses of Conzelmann (:22-24).

<sup>186</sup> H.H. Oliver, "The Lucan Birth Stories and the Purpose of Luke-Acts", *NTS* 10 (1964), 202-226.

<sup>187</sup> W. B. Tatum, "The Epoch of Israel: Luke 1-2 and the Theological Plan of Luke-Acts", *NTS* 13 (1967), 184-195.

R.E. Brown sees the birth narrative as of crucial significance for the whole of Luke-Acts. Luke 1-2 is, for Brown, "a true introduction to some of the main themes of the Gospel proper". He concludes that "no analysis of Lucan theology should neglect it."<sup>188</sup> Brown further expresses the significance of Luke 1-2 thus:

In many ways one may compare the relation of Luke 1-2 to the rest of the Gospel and the relation of Acts 1-2 to the rest of Acts. The first two chapters of Acts supply a transition from the story of Jesus to the story of the Church... Similarly in the first two chapters of the Gospel there is a transition from the story of Israel to the story of Jesus. There appear, almost from the pages of the OT, characters like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, who are the final representatives of the piety of Israel, while Mary recites a hymn that vocalizes the aspirations of the remnant (the "poor ones" who constitute God's servant Israel - 1:54). The voices of these figures form a chorus to hail the new era marked by the advent of JBap and of Jesus. Thus, one may wish to keep Conzelmann's analysis of three periods (Israel, Jesus, Church), but see the scriptural representatives of the three periods as: (1) the Law and the prophets, i.e., much of what we call the OT; (2) the Gospel account of the ministry, beginning with JBap; (3) the account of the post-pentecostal period in the Book of Acts. Between (1) and (2) there is a transitional narrative, the infancy story of Luke 1-2; between (2) and (3) there is a transitional narrative, the story of the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 1-2.<sup>189</sup>

P.S. Minear, on finding great fault with Conzelmann's interpretation of Luke 16:16 and his failure to trace the *Formgeschichte* or the *Redaktionsgeschichte* of that text, unleashes a broadside against Conzelmann by observing that "It must be said that rarely has a scholar placed so much weight on so dubious an interpretation of so difficult a logion".

Much scholarly debate has revolved around the question: Does Conzelmann really believe that Luke dispenses with eschatology altogether? The majority of scholars seem to accept Conzelmann's view that Luke has merely *postponed* the Parousia to some indeterminate time in the future.<sup>190</sup> All Luke has done is remove it from the centre of the stage without actually doing away with it altogether. Some other scholars, as we have seen above (for example Käsemann, Haenchen, Dibelius, and others) have interpreted Conzelmann's position as *replacing* eschatology with salvation history.

<sup>188</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 242.

<sup>189</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 242-243.

<sup>190</sup> The same scholars generally tend to accept the broad outlines of Conzelmann's thesis regarding a three-stage salvation history (Israel-Jesus-Church), though it is equally true that most of them disagree with him on specific details. See J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 62-63.



In fact, Conzelmann was not quite alone in de-emphasizing the Parousia. Marshall, for example, also held the view, together with a number of other scholars, that the main motivation for Luke's work was to do away with the early Christians' pre-occupation with the delayed return of Christ. The theology of Luke-Acts as a whole "was the result of a church and an author trying to come to terms with the experience of disappointment" at the non-fulfillment of the promised return of Christ.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, where the hope for the immediate return of Christ had originally been the key factor of Christian belief and theology, Luke replaced that hope with the presence of the Holy Spirit. In other words, where the present time had essentially been one of waiting for the coming Parousia, Luke subtly changed it into a time of service and mission. This position is strongly defended by R.F. O'Toole who, in commenting on Acts 1:6-11, a key passage for Luke's understanding of the Parousia, makes the following observations concerning the disciples' standing and gazing into the sky immediately following upon Christ's ascension:

The aspect of Luke's description of Jesus' ascension in Acts which interests us is that, while the apostles are gazing into heaven, the two men say that their gazing into heaven achieves nothing and that Jesus will come in the same way as they have seen him go into heaven. Luke informs his readers that an intense anticipation of Jesus' second coming, this gazing into heaven, pays no dividends. That the risen Christ will come again is a surety, but the apostles must accept the reality that they do not know when...The Lucan description of the ascension in Acts is thus realistic and challenging...The scene does not create any expectation of an instant or imminent Parousia.<sup>192</sup>

However, in spite of the many negative assessments of Conzelmann, it is surely not possible to ignore the tremendous influence he has exerted in the field of Lucan studies. While he may be regarded as a saint by some, or as a sinner<sup>193</sup> by others in the scholarly fraternity, it cannot be denied that Conzelmann has made the most significant contribution to Lucan studies since the 1950's. It is equally a fact that most subsequent studies on Luke-Acts have been influenced by him, and that they

<sup>191</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 48-49.

<sup>192</sup> R.F. O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An Analysis of Luke-Acts*, Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1984, 151.

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, Gasque's comment that "most recent studies of Acts reject Conzelmann's thesis", *Int* 42 (1988), 117-131. One may also note the less than warm reviews of Conzelmann's *The Theology of St. Luke* by Van Unnik in "Luke-Acts: A Storm Center in Contemporary Scholarship", 15-32; and U. Wilckens, "Interpreting Luke-Acts in a Period of Existentialist Theology", in L.E. Keck & J.L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 60-83.

have in general tended to define their position in relation to that of Conzelmann.<sup>194</sup> Perhaps the 'storm' or the 'eye of the storm' that both W.C. van Unnik and R.I. Pervo alluded to earlier on is nowhere more evident than in scholarship's response to Conzelmann's *The Theology of St. Luke*.<sup>195</sup> A number of scholars since 1954 have accepted Conzelmann's redaction-critical method, and the works of these scholars have mostly sustained, modified, or rejected Conzelmann's approach to Luke's theology.

Notwithstanding all views to the contrary, and since the view took root after Conzelmann, that Luke is primarily a theologian (with allowances given that he sometimes made use of history to express his theology), it is to be accepted that the majority of recent Lucan scholars have recognized that, whatever else he may have been, and whatever methodology he may have employed, Luke was also a theologian. This is quite apart from the fact that specific details of his theology have not always found universal acceptance in scholarly circles. It is also of some interest to note that even Gasque, convinced 'Luke-as-historian' scholar that he is, finds himself constrained by the results of his research to acknowledge this fact.<sup>196</sup>

Various points of emphasis have emerged as some scholars have maintained that in order to understand Luke's theology, we need to get in touch with the persons and the social circumstances behind it. Whereas the leading questions in this endeavour had been those of authorship, datation, audience, and, perhaps more polemical of all, the

<sup>194</sup> Even Gasque, whose position is decidedly anti-Conzelmann, does acknowledge that recent essays, especially those of Conzelmann, have brought the historicity of Acts to the centre of controversy in New Testament studies. See Gasque's "The Historical Value of the Book of Acts", *Evangelical Quarterly* 41 (1969), 68-88.

<sup>195</sup> Originally published in German in 1954 under the title *Die Mitte Der Zeit*, Conzelmann's book quickly went through five editions in the relatively short space of time. On the influence of Conzelmann on Lucan scholarship, see Gasque, (*History*, 247-249), though he does not fail to indicate the main weaknesses in Conzelmann's *Redaktionsgeschichtlich* approach. In spite of that, however, Gasque is objective enough to admit that "one can only confess to a great admiration of the erudition and creative scholarship manifested by Conzelmann in his commentary", (:249). Another positive assessment of the general approach of Conzelmann is found in I.H. Marshall's "Recent Study" (:4-8), though he also is not sparing in his criticism of the finer details of Conzelmann's views.

<sup>196</sup> Gasque acknowledges, for example, that "It seems likely that the debate which is taking place in the world of New Testament scholarship at the present day will continue to be centered around the idea of 'Luke the theologian'", (*History*, 309). Indeed, a survey of recent Lucan scholarship proves Gasque's impression that "the defenders of 'Luke the historian' have seldom been given a fair hearing by those who take the contrary position" (:5) to be unfounded. Works such as those of Hemer, Bruce, Marshall, Sherwin-White, to name but a few scholars, have in fact been quite influential and have found some sympathetic disciples. Powell (*What Are They Saying About Acts?*) even observes that "interest in reading [Acts] as history is still alive and well" (:94).

purpose of Luke-Acts – R. Maddox (who has certainly not failed to have his detractors)<sup>197</sup> has attempted to give an outline of what he thinks Luke set out to do, and so too have many other writers in their commentaries – more recently the questions have become those of geography and social background (which is not to say the earlier questions have been answered to scholarship's satisfaction).

#### 2.4 Luke's Purposes: A Storm-Centre in Lucan Studies

In the face of such a great variety of opinions expressed regarding the purpose of Luke-Acts (most of the positions being mutually exclusive), the modern student can perhaps be forgiven for despairing of ever really knowing what the author of Luke-Acts was actually up to. To paraphrase Bovon, Luke has certainly remained 'enigmatic'.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>197</sup> R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1982. See especially chapters I (:1-30) and VII (:180-187), in which Maddox lists at least eleven purposes of Acts: (1) an explanation why Jesus has not yet returned as promised (the delayed Parousia: H. Conzelmann *The Theology of St. Luke*, 95-234); (2) defending Christianity: E. Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 100-102); (3) defending Paul before Rome: A.J. Mattill (*Luke as a Historian in Criticism*); (4) a defense of Paul and his role before the community: J. Jervell (*Luke and the People of God*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1972, 17); (5) defending Christianity against Gnosticism: C.H. Talbert (*Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, Missoula, Scholars Press, 1974, 13-15); (6) to evangelize and convert people: J.C. O'Neill (*The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting*, London, SPCK, 1970, 172-185); (7) confirmation of the Word and the message of salvation: Van Unnik ("The 'Book of Acts' the Confirmation of the Gospel", *NovT* 4 (1960-1961), 26-59; I.H. Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke*, 35-36); O'Toole (*The Unity of Luke's Theology*, 17); (8) a theological treatise on God's faithfulness to Israel: D.L. Tiede (*Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980, 27-28); (9) a sociological legitimation of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the proclamation of the gospel, as well as a defense of Christianity as a non-political threat to Rome: Esler (*Community and Gospel*, 210-219); (10) to offer conciliation between Gentiles and Jews by showing that the offer of salvation to the Gentiles is a natural extension of Judaism: R.L. Brawley (*Luke-Acts and the Jews*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1987, 155-159); (11) an anti-Semitic writing and a total rejection of the Jews: J.T. Sanders (*The Jews in Luke-Acts*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1987). Powell also gives another listing of the purposes various scholars have ascribed to Luke's writings, among which are the irenic (Acts was written to repair the breach between Peter and Paul – the Tübingen school); polemical – Acts is an attack on Gnosticism – C.H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics* – or Acts was written to polemicize against Jewish forms of Christianity – J. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts*; apologetic – Acts was written to defend Christianity from the Roman Empire and to convince the political administration to grant Christianity an official status in the Empire as a *religio licita* – Haenchen; evangelistic – Acts was written to convert pagans – F.F. Bruce, J.E. O'Neill; pastoral – Acts was written to strengthen the faith of believers – van Unnik; theological – Acts was written to address a theological crisis occasioned by delay of the parousia – Conzelmann. For these, and other descriptions of the various (and often mutually exclusive) positions regarding the purpose of Luke's writings, see Powell's brief treatment in *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (1991:13-20), and in the fuller and more detailed treatment in R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Acts*.

<sup>198</sup> F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, 418.

Given such a scenario, the position of some moderate scholars (J. Dupont among them) may perhaps be instructive, if not actually opening a window to a new and broader understanding of Luke-Acts. According to this position,

it is impossible, indeed, even misleading, to think of *one* exclusive purpose lying behind the writing of Luke-Acts, or *one* all-pervasive theological motif. It would be much more fruitful to think in terms of a variety of purposes and themes<sup>199</sup>

If we keep this in mind, perhaps the most realistic position to adopt with regard to the purpose of Luke's writings is the one suggested by Powell:<sup>200</sup>

On the question of purpose, it has been suggested that the various proposals should be considered, where possible, as complementary. As one scholar has noted, "any story that can be easily collapsed into one abstract idea or one specific purpose is not a very good story".<sup>201</sup> Whatever else it may be, the book of Acts is definitely a good story! We should be careful, therefore, not to reduce it to a one-factor story. Rather, we should read this book for what it is: a story "as complex and rich, as varied and mysterious, as true as life itself".<sup>202</sup>

The view that the author of Luke-Acts was a theologian has not been free of its own brand of controversy. Chief among them is the problem raised by the attempt to relate the data of Pauline epistles (and indeed the image of Paul himself as he is presented in his authentic letters) to the narrative of Acts. Haenchen, for example, lists three major areas in which Luke's picture of Paul is at variance with that of the Paul of the epistles: Paul as outstanding orator (affirmed in Acts 17:22-31; 21:40; 22:1f; 24:ff, but repudiated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:10); Paul as a miracle worker (affirmed in

<sup>199</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 303. Or, to paraphrase Bovon, the vast range of themes and purposes of Luke-Acts "underline the insatiability of all the intentions of the Evangelist", by which Bovon makes it quite evident that Luke had indeed more than just a few purposes for writing the Third Gospel and Acts. See also his *Luke the Theologian* (418). Indeed, the question of the possible multiplicity of purposes in Luke's work had already been raised in the nineteenth century by K. Schrader. It was clear in Schrader's mind that Luke could not have had one purpose when he wrote, and Schrader showed this by interpreting different parts of Acts as reflecting different purposes which, according to him, were largely apologetic or polemical. Schrader's views on Acts are contained in volume 5 of his large work, *Der Apostel Paulus* (Leipzig, Engelmann, 1835). Some decades later, A. Wikenhauser, despite his deep conviction regarding the historical reliability of Acts, had the long-term insight that led him to make the observation that the study of the history of Lucan research "hat nicht nur historischen Wert, sondern kann auch zeigen, dass es nicht so einfach ist, den Leitgedanken der Apg mit Sicherheit nachzuweisen" (*Die Apostelgeschichte und ihr Geschichtswert*, Münster, Aschendorff, 1921, 8).

<sup>200</sup> M.A. Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, 20.

<sup>201</sup> Here Powell quotes W.H. Willimon (*Acts*, Atlanta, John Knox, 1988). Willimon further wisely cautions: "We do well to be suspicious of any claim for a single key to the interpretation of Acts, and we should resist any effort to make judgments about which purposes are superior, inferior, original, or derivative" (:11).

<sup>202</sup> W.H. Willimon, *Acts*, 11.



Acts 13:6-12; 14:8-10; 20:7-12, which Paul contradicts in 2 Corinthians 12:12); and finally Luke's non-affirmation of Paul's claim to be an Apostle. According to Luke (in Acts) only the Twelve are Apostles. Luke does not accord Paul this honour, so that even he (Paul) has to appeal to the authority of the authentic Apostles for some decisions (e.g. Acts 13:31; 10:41; 1:21f in which Paul is denied the status of an Apostle, as opposed to 1 Corinthians 15:5-8; Galatians 2:8, in which Paul insists he is an Apostle).<sup>203</sup>

When all is said and done, however, all that the student of Luke-Acts is left to go on with is the explicitly stated purpose of his work that Luke sets out in the prologue to the Third Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). How he actually goes about realizing the aim set out in these introductory lines is a question that scholarship has grappled with for a long time, but it is beginning to look as if we might finally be moving in a direction that few would find fault with, at least not in its broader and more general principles. The question of details, however, is another matter, as these are dependent upon the methodological principles applied by the scholar. In any case, as Bovon has observed after a lifetime of Lucan research, when it comes to matters of detail it would be naïve to expect unanimous consensus in a field of study as varied and complex as Luke-Acts.

### **2.5 Luke: Historian and Theologian**

As Willimon and others have observed, it would be an over-simplification to reduce the rich and varied nature of Luke's writings to any one category or purpose. In the debate (at times polemical) between those who uphold the 'Luke-the-historian' view and those who maintain the 'Luke-the-theologian' position, modern scholars have increasingly acknowledged the necessity of adopting a middle position, one that acknowledges Luke as both historian and theologian. The approach taken by E. Schweizer is indicative of a trend adopted by an increasing number of scholars:

<sup>203</sup> See further on this point Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 113-116). See also W.G. Kümmel's discussion of the same point in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, 181-185. Kümmel maintains that the difference between the two pictures of Paul in Acts and in the genuine Pauline letters is so vast that "not a single specifically Pauline idea is to be found in Acts" (:181). F.F. Bruce has also wrestled with the problem, but he regards the perceived conflicts between the two pictures of Paul as being more apparent than real; see F.F. Bruce, *An Expanded Paraphrase of Paul*, Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1965, 34-40.



[Luke] *wants* to be a historian. At this point he has already made a theological decision. In his opinion faith is fundamentally rooted in what happened historically "before us" and "beyond us", datable according to Roman emperors and Jewish authorities (1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1-2; cf. 3:23)...Faith can obviously not be adopted without knowing what happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>204</sup>

In the same vein, J. Jervell does not view Luke as a historian who writes history only to preserve records for posterity. As such, the historical facts are not essential in themselves; rather one has to inquire as to their significance.<sup>205</sup> For Jervell, this significance beyond the historical presentation of Luke is a theological one. Luke uses history as the contextual background for his theological purposes.

Though I.H. Marshall, like other convinced 'Luke-the-historian' scholars, strongly defends the historical reliability of Luke-Acts, he acknowledges that Luke was both a historian and a theologian.<sup>206</sup> D.L. Bock also takes a more objective stance and says of Luke that he is

a sensitive observer of the events he describes. He is interested in both history and theology. He writes not just about the time sequence of events and teaching, but about their topical and theological relationship as well. He writes as a theologian and pastor, but as one whose direction is marked out by the history that preceded him. To underemphasize any element in the Lucan effort, whether pastoral, theological, or historical, is to underestimate the depth of his account.<sup>207</sup>

Though C.J. Hemer appears to lean more on the historical reliability of Luke-Acts, he fully accepts also the theological dimension of the work: "A more satisfactory view must be one which brings the history and theology together."<sup>208</sup>

Slowly, therefore, the trend has shifted away from dogmatic positions (Luke as historian, and Luke as theologian) to more balanced arguments that acknowledge the

<sup>204</sup> E. Schweizer, *A Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991, 136.

<sup>205</sup> J. Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 124.

<sup>206</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1970. See also H. Flender, *Heil und Geschichte in der Theologie des Lukas*, München, Kaiser Verlag, 1965, and W.W. Gasque, *History*.

<sup>207</sup> D.L. Bock, *Luke 1:1 – 9:50*, 14.

<sup>208</sup> C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1990, 220.

richness and diversity of Luke's writings. In this way, to echo Bock, the reader of Luke-Acts can fully appreciate the 'depth of [Luke's] account'.

## 2.6 *Theological Approaches to John the Baptist*

Research on John the Baptist has largely tended to be influenced by his perceived theological function within not just the Lucan corpus in particular but in New Testament studies generally. From this perspective, John has been studied almost exclusively from the point of view of his relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. G. Yamasaki has noted that "To a very large extent, the history of research on John the Baptist has run on a parallel track to the development of research on Jesus."<sup>209</sup> Up to the closing decades of the Nineteenth Century C.E. John was not accorded independent status in New Testament scholarship. The earlier works by H.S. Reimarus and D.F. Strauss had influenced the direction scholarship was to take well beyond their own lifetimes, a direction in which the attention accorded to John the Baptist did not amount to anything more than secondary and insignificant consideration in works whose central figure of attention was Jesus.

There began to be a change in this state of affairs towards the end of the Nineteenth Century C.E. onwards, when various works began to appear that focused more attentively on John the Baptist. Examples of such works include those by A.M. McCullagh,<sup>210</sup> R.C. Houghton,<sup>211</sup> J. Feather,<sup>212</sup> F.B. Meyer.<sup>213</sup> Though these works offer a largely non-critical analysis of John's life – accepting as they do the Gospel narratives as accurate and historical accounts – they, nonetheless, marked a shift in scholarship's perception of John as an individual character in his own right. However, while the neglect of John was at an end, this gave way to his theological subordination to Jesus. John was taken as an individual at the service of Christianity's belief in Jesus as the Messiah for whom John prepared the way.

<sup>209</sup> G. Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death*, 12.

<sup>210</sup> A.M. McCullagh, *The Peerless Prophet; or The Life and Times of John the Baptist*, New York, Anson D.F. Randolph, 1888.

<sup>211</sup> R.C. Houghton, *John the Baptist, the Forerunner of Our Lord: His Life and Work*, New York, Hunt & Eaton, 1889.

<sup>212</sup> J. Feather, *The Last of the Prophets: A Study of the Life, Teaching, and Character of John the Baptist*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1894.

<sup>213</sup> F.B. Meyer, *John the Baptist*, New York, Revell, 1900.

The works of the scholars cited above were followed by form-critical studies on John the Baptist that have exercised a lasting influence.<sup>214</sup> Among the earliest of these studies were M. Dibelius,<sup>215</sup> M. Goguel,<sup>216</sup> E. Lohmeyer,<sup>217</sup> and C. Kraeling.<sup>218</sup> For Dibelius, the most reliable sources of the historical data on John the Baptist are to be found in the sayings of Jesus.<sup>219</sup> For Goguel, Jesus was baptized by John and was also John's disciple for a while, otherwise the New Testament Christian tradition of John the Baptist does not reflect the historical John.<sup>220</sup> For Lohmeyer, John the Baptist is essential to the development of Christianity. Jesus developed his eschatological proclamation from that of John, whose disciple he was.<sup>221</sup> According to Kraeling, John's disenchantment with the secularizing tendencies of the Jerusalem priesthood drove him into the wilderness. Jesus was at some point a disciple of John.

When C. Scobie made the observation that "John's name must be almost as well known as that of Jesus, so firmly embedded is it in Christian tradition and literature and art"<sup>222</sup> he articulated the principal approach to John the Baptist of not just the Christian tradition and history, but also the direction of an overwhelming majority of modern studies on John. It has almost always been in relation to Jesus as Messiah that John has been studied. The Gospel tradition has succeeded in boxing John up in an exclusively theological frame: John the Baptist was the forerunner sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus who is the promised Messiah. Thus far the Gospel tradition in a nutshell. J.E. Taylor does not question that there was a relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist; she questions, however, the presupposition that it is through understanding Jesus that we are able to understand John. On the contrary,

<sup>214</sup> For subsequent developments in research on John the Baptist see, among others, the systematic examinations in G. Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death*, 20-32; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, 19-26; E.F. Lupieri, *Giovanni Battista nelle tradizioni sinottiche*, Brescia, Paideia Editrice, 1988.

<sup>215</sup> M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911.

<sup>216</sup> M. Goguel, *Au seuil de l'Evangile: Jean-Baptiste*, Paris, Payot, 1928.

<sup>217</sup> E. Lohmeyer, *Das Urchristentum. 1. Buch: Johannes der Täufer*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932.

<sup>218</sup> C. Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951.

<sup>219</sup> M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung*, 2.

<sup>220</sup> M. Goguel, *Au seuil de l'Evangile*, 9.

<sup>221</sup> E. Lohmeyer, *Das Urchristentum*, 3-5.

<sup>222</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist: A New Quest of the Historical John*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1964, 11.

Taylor takes it as a basic presupposition that "we can understand Jesus better if we understand John."<sup>223</sup>

For Hans Conzelmann, John the Baptist is to be understood primarily in terms of the salvation history and his role in it, specifically his being at the dividing point between two epochs in the continuous history of salvation.<sup>224</sup> For Conzelmann, this division between two epochs of the history of salvation is located at Luke 16:16 ("The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently"). Conzelmann's interpretation of this verse is saying that John the Baptist stands at the close of the earlier epoch of salvation history, namely the age of the prophets, or the age of Israel, and at the dawn of the new age of salvation, namely the period of the church, for which John prepares the way by preaching and baptism. John's great merit in all this is, according to Conzelmann, that "he refused to claim for himself the Messianic role".<sup>225</sup> Luke 16:16 is for Conzelmann "the key to the topography of redemption history",<sup>226</sup> and the location of John the Baptist in this *textus princeps* in Luke-Acts puts into perspective John's position as the greatest of the prophets. Conzelmann concludes his analysis of John's function in the theology of Luke-Acts thus:

John has a clearly defined function in the centre of the story of salvation. As it is his ministry rather than his person that serves as a preparation for Jesus, he is subordinate to the work of Jesus in the same way as is the whole epoch of the Law.<sup>227</sup>

In his *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching*, J.A. Fitzmyer buttresses the Christian tradition of John the Baptist as "the precursor of the Lord".<sup>228</sup> Fitzmyer notes the "remarkable consensus among the four evangelists" in casting John in this role. What we know of John the Baptist, according to Fitzmyer, is drawn from texts that "form part of the gospel tradition of the Christian church, composed to stir up faith in Jesus of Nazareth and in his meaning for human destiny."<sup>229</sup> For Fitzmyer, therefore, as for Conzelmann and other theologians, John the Baptist is to be located

<sup>223</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 11.

<sup>224</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1961, 22-23.

<sup>225</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 23.

<sup>226</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 23.

<sup>227</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 24.

<sup>228</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1989.

<sup>229</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 89.

within the theological purposes of the Gospel writers, and is to be understood primarily from the perspectives of these purposes. According to Fitzmyer,

John is to be taken as a transitional figure, acting as the caesura between the Period of Israel and the Period of Jesus. He basically belongs to the Period of Israel because of his circumcision and incorporation into the Israel of God; but he is a figure of the period chosen by God to inaugurate the Period of Jesus, when salvation would be accomplished.<sup>230</sup>

Fitzmyer concludes his study on the theological function of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts thus:

Luke in his Gospel and Acts has his own way of presenting John the Baptist, even as precursor of the Lord. The idea was already present in the pre-Lucan tradition. Luke has picked it up and handled it his own way, but he has not suppressed the idea. [John] is the chosen figure of the Period of Israel, chosen to inaugurate the Period of Jesus itself, wherein salvation for humanity is achieved in a new way.<sup>231</sup>

### 3. LUKE-ACTS AS LITERATURE

#### 3.1 Introduction

We made the observation earlier, that, in broad terms, four distinct trends appear to have emerged in the study on Luke-Acts since the 1950's. Generally, English-speaking scholars have tended to accept the historical value of Luke's writings, following on the footsteps of Ramsay<sup>232</sup> and Sherwin-White, whose works clearly demonstrated the value of studying Luke's writings from the point of view of ancient geography, history, and archaeology. In this they have had the support of some scholars like Hengel, Trocmè, and Hemer, among others. The stress on the historical value of Luke-Acts did not, however, exclude the fact that the author had also a theological interest. Nonetheless, according to this group of scholars, Luke's primary aim was a historical one.

The generality of German scholarship, on the other hand, tended to stress the theological aspect of Luke-Acts. Luke's historical reliability was given an extremely low rating by the dominant school represented by Vielhauer, Haenchen, and

<sup>230</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 107.

<sup>231</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 110.

<sup>232</sup> Ramsay had started from a position of skepticism regarding the historical value of Acts but his studies had so convinced him of the historical reliability of Acts, which, according to Marshall, he came to describe "in terms that might well be regarded as excessive". See I.H. Marshall's Foreword to Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, vii.



Conzelmann. A whole generation of scholars, both German- and English-speaking, arose that viewed Luke's historical dependability with varied degrees of suspicion. However, it is fair to note that even among German scholars there began to be a shift from the extremist skeptical position of Conzelmann and others to a more balanced assessment of Luke's writings. For example, Lüdemann, a convinced 'Luke-the-theologian' scholar, has made an important effort to identify the traditions preserved in Luke's writings and to assess their possible historical value. There have at least been signs, admittedly few, that some of the "Luke-the-theologian" school have become more open, if not to the possibility that Luke's writings contain important historical information, certainly to questioning their own positions.

What marks the modern trend in Lucan scholarship is therefore not so much the rigidity that has traditionally marked the polarized positions 'Luke-the-historian' and 'Luke-the-theologian', but a conscious trend towards a synthesis of the two views. Not few are the voices in either camp that have begun to accommodate, or at least be open to the position of those holding opposing views. In the section 'Luke the Historian and Theologian', above, we have tried to show the attempts made by scholars from both sides to meet each other half-way, as it were, and acknowledge that, given the multiplicity of Luke's purposes and the injustice done to his writings by trying to force them into one particular mould, Luke was in fact both a historian and a theologian. Some have viewed Luke-Acts as a theological history,<sup>233</sup> while others have seen him as a historical theologian. Notwithstanding the questions that can arise from the use of this terminology, the main point remains that efforts have been, and still are, underway for scholars to come to some working consensus regarding the approach to Luke-Acts. Given this current thrust, it might be that we are beginning to see a shift from Gasque's despairing remark that "there is no general agreement among scholars on even the most basic issues of Lucan research"<sup>234</sup> to a broader and more dialogical methodological approach to this research, one that may yield more positive results in terms of a broader scholarly consensus on some of the key issues. Recent research has shown such a great fluidity in studies on Luke-Acts that it may be best under the circumstances to be not too dogmatic about one's

<sup>233</sup> R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 16.

<sup>234</sup> W.W. Gasque, *History*, 305.

position and maintain a healthy questioning but open attitude to advances in scholarship.

### 3.2 *Literary Approaches to Luke-Acts*

A result of the continuing openness to different perspectives and approaches to Lucan studies is perhaps seen in the shift from history to theology and, in our days, to the application of the principles of narrative theory, best seen in the rhetorical and narrative criticism which make extensive use of secular literary theory. In recent years, Lucan research in general (and New Testament study in particular) has seen a great influx of literary critical methodologies that attempt to interpret scriptural texts according to systems and criteria traditionally used for secular literature. While previous (and some current) studies have invariably viewed (or have found it necessary to view)<sup>235</sup> Luke-Acts as a window to the world and environment behind the text, narrative criticism concentrates on the actual story line, the narrator, the audience (sometimes referred to as the "auditors"), and the point of view that the narrator wants to put across, or the emotion he or she intends to arouse in his readers. This last point is a major element in rhetorical analysis, especially in its 'reader response' application. This response by the reader is defined in the following way by W.S. Kurz:

Reader-response criticism generally presumes spontaneous and habitual imaginative reading activities and focuses on the conscious steps readers must take to fill in gaps in the information provided them in the narrative...The endings of Luke and Acts and beginning of Acts provide good illustrations of readers' filling gaps in the plots of narratives.<sup>236</sup>

The examples cited, namely the endings of Luke and Acts and beginning of Acts, are chosen because of their seeming "incompletion",<sup>237</sup> thus providing the reader an

<sup>235</sup> See R.C. Tannehill (*The Narrative Unity of Luke Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1, Philadelphia and Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1986): "Past concern with sources and historical events has sometimes led to hypotheses that stretch beyond the available evidence. Nevertheless, an understanding of first century society and of historical events within it may be important for understanding Acts as a narrative. I appeal, for instance, to the conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple to explain an important aspect of Luke-Acts...I believe the study of first-century Mediterranean literature and society may illuminate unspoken assumptions behind the narrative and may also suggest specific reasons for emphases in the text" (:4-5).

<sup>236</sup> W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 32.

<sup>237</sup> We emphasize the words "seeming incompletion" because what the reader-response critics see as gaps in the narrative are in fact interpreted differently by other scholars. For M.C. Parsons, for example, the so-called "gaps" are an indication of the openness of the Gospel to its sequel, Acts. When, in other words, the Gospel ends with the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for "power from on

opportunity to fill in gaps in narratives that close “in the midst of an action that continues beyond the end of the story”. In other words, there is a lacuna in the story that the (attentive) reader has to fill in. Kurz offers the following as an example:

Another sign of incompleteness...is the very grammar used in the final sentence [of Luke]. Instead of using a tense like the aorist or perfect, which would finish the narrative with a completed action, the writer concludes with an awkward periphrastic construction using a verb in the imperfect tense with a present participle: “and they were continually in the Temple praising God” (24:53, RNAB: *καὶ ἦσαν διαπαντός ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ εὐλογούντες τὸν θεόν*). The grammatical forms emphasize by their very awkwardness the continuous state of the disciples’ praising God in the Temple. The narration thus closes in the midst of an action that continues beyond the end of the story.<sup>238</sup>

The reader-response method is seen as offering the modern reader communion with the ancient past. When applied to contemporary literature, however, the method focuses more on the reader’s entertainment in reading, or on how the reader is affected by it. This method carries with it a subjectivity that is worth taking note of, as it relies on the free play of the reader’s imagination. Clearly, application of the reader-response method may not always be appropriate when applied to the Bible as sacred scripture.

As we have already noted, for decades Lucan studies have been considered in terms of their weight on the ‘history-theology’ scale, and much debate has centred around either upholding or denigrating the one or the other side of the scale, seeking, as it were, to tip the scale in favour of the one or the other position. In recent years, however, scholars have tended to move away from these ‘neat’ definitions (e.g. ‘Luke-Acts as History’ or ‘Luke-Acts as Theology’), and have sought to go beyond these set categories. H. Moxnes’ way of doing so has been to pay attention not just to the possible historical nature of events narrated in Luke-Acts, but in getting to the ‘soul’ of the narrative – the *meaning* of the historical data presented by Luke in his

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high” (Luke 24:49, 54 “And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high...And they returned to Jerusalem”), this ending is a way of implying “to be continued...” which connects directly with Acts 1:4, 5 (“he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...the Holy Spirit”) Acts 1:8 (“you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”), and with the coming of the Holy Spirit (i.e. “the power from on high”) in Acts 2. See M.C. Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context*, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1987, 93-94.

<sup>238</sup> W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 33.

writings.<sup>239</sup> Moxnes believes it is a meaning that can be so actualized that the reader is not only informed of the events by Luke the author, but that he or she actually engages in and with the story. The reader in fact participates in the story being told. If Luke-Acts is 'history', what is the *meaning* behind that history, and how can the present, modern reader be part of this history?

In *The Economy of the Kingdom* (1988), Moxnes attempts to move "beyond old conclusions, set categories, and conventional methods",<sup>240</sup> and he does so by seeking to give *meaning* to the history behind the events in Luke-Acts. But Moxnes is surely aware also of the vast array of scholars for whom the Lucan opus is primarily a theological work (note, for example, some of the key names in his bibliography: Fitzmyer, Marshall, to mention a few), yet he does not extend his new "category" to include or apply it to the 'Luke-the-theologian' position. This has the unfortunate result that it limits his new approach to the confines of a social science. It is that, certainly, and Moxnes admits as much;<sup>241</sup> however, Luke-Acts also clearly seeks to make a statement about faith and belief, a fact which, in our view, Moxnes continues to neglect. The questions he asks from a historical perspective could well be asked also from a theological reading of Luke-Acts: "What are the norms and values of this society? What are the rules for social relations and human interaction?"<sup>242</sup> One searches Moxnes' book in vain for a theological response to these questions, while one is sated from a socio-analytical point of view.

This omission notwithstanding, it must be accepted that Moxnes does indeed mark a significant shift from "set categories and conventional methods" in Lucan studies and initiates a trend that other scholars (e.g. Esler, Moessner, Schottroff and Stegemann, among others) later develop. This group of representatives of a new direction in Lucan studies has certainly gone a long way towards unfettering Lucan studies from merely historical and theological considerations. They have, instead, introduced a socio-literary dimension to the discipline.

<sup>239</sup> See H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, xv-xvii.

<sup>240</sup> H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, xi.

<sup>241</sup> "In particular, this study focuses on an often neglected aspect, the moral understanding of social relations and economic interaction" (:xvi).

<sup>242</sup> H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, xv.



It must be noted, however, that this new socio-literary dimension has neither sprung from, nor developed into a monolithic, one-sided position. Indeed, it is probably correct to say there are as many tributaries to the mainstream as there are scholars who have adopted this approach to Lucan studies. The literary approach has been fruitful both in terms of the diversity of methodologies as well as in the enrichment of scholarly insight. The new socio-literary approach is especially attractive for its openness to, and creative use of modern developments in sciences like sociology, anthropology, and structures of political and hierarchical organization.

One positive element that the various branches of literary criticism in general (which includes narrative criticism, among others) have brought to biblical studies is that it is seen by some scholars as promising some redress from what some see as "the failure of historical criticism to approach the text as canonical and as biblical authority for the Christian church".<sup>243</sup> This is the basic presupposition of narrative criticism, namely that the biblical text is taken "as is", that is to say in its canonical form.<sup>244</sup> Thus the main concerns of the historical-critical method such as form-, redaction-, and textual-criticism (all of which seek to come to grips with the world and processes

<sup>243</sup> H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 174.

<sup>244</sup> On this concept see W.S. Kurz (*Reading Luke-Acts*, 1-2). This position would, no doubt, give a lot of joy to B. Childs, the foremost proponent of the view that the scriptures (particularly the Old Testament, but also the New) are best left to speak to the reader in their received form. See his strong argument for this position in his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London, SCM Ltd., 1985), especially page 6, on which he expresses the view that "the canonical approach to Old Testament theology is unequivocal in asserting that the object of theological reflection is the canonical writing of the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew scriptures which are the received traditions of Israel. The materials for theological reflection are not the events or experiences behind the text...The discipline of Old Testament theology derives from theological reflection on a received body of scripture whose formation was the result of a lengthy history of development". Childs applies the same principle in his *The New Testament as Canon* (London, SCM Ltd., 1994, 5-53). It must be noted, however, that the canonical approach to Luke-Acts is not without its problems. M.C. Parsons & R.I. Pervo (*Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), deliver a broadside early on in their investigations when they state that "the canonical disunity of Luke and Acts is not a debatable point...according to all the evidence available to us, Luke and Acts never stood side-by-side in any canonical list" (:8). They also point to the distinct textual histories of the two writings, and the problematic "relationship between the Alexandrian text and the much longer Western text" (:10), aspects that seem to them to suggest that Luke and Acts had quite distinct histories of transmission and reception in the early church. Indeed, Parsons and Pervo go so far as to maintain that both the textual variations and the different histories in transmission "indicate, at the least, a disinterest among early readers in preserving the 'unity' of Luke and Acts" (:9). Basically, therefore, the two authors plead for clarity when narrative criticism talks of the 'canonical' text: *Which* text? In *Reading Acts, (A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), C.H. Talbert attempts to find a way round this obstacle by suggesting Luke and Acts be read today as they would have been read in the "precanonical period" (:13), that is to say as a continuous story told in two volumes without the interruption of the Gospel of John. R.C. Tannehill defends the canonical approach to Luke-Acts: "I am concerned with Luke-Acts in its finished form, not with pre-Lukan tradition" (*The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 6).



behind the text) play a very limited (if at all any) role in narrative criticism. Historical criticism provides an important distancing in reading scripture, by which the Bible is rescued from contemporary prejudices about its meaning to recover what it meant historically at the time of its production. But once the Bible is thus detached from present preconceptions, it remains locked in the past unless there are ways other than historical criticism by which to dialogue and find some communion with the text.<sup>245</sup>

Central to the literary approach (whether in the form of rhetorical or narrative criticism) is the acknowledgment that Luke-Acts is a story, and, as has been noted above, a "good story".<sup>246</sup> Powell<sup>247</sup> expresses the same view differently:

Luke is a masterful storyteller and the book of Acts well displays his art. Where else within so few pages, E.J. Goodspeed once observed, "will be found such a varied series of exciting events – trials, riots, persecutions, escapes, martyrdoms, voyages, shipwrecks, rescues?"<sup>248</sup>

In addition to these aspects of Luke's writings, Pervo has also been able to demonstrate "how pervasive the element of entertainment actually is" in them:

Popular works were doubtless often *edifying*, the quality Haenchen found dominant in Acts. They were also quite frequently intended *to entertain*, an object that did not at all diminish their value for illumination and improvement. Only recently has the presence of entertainment in Acts been accorded some of the appreciation it merits.<sup>249</sup>

In acknowledging the importance of storytelling in transmitting a message, R.C. Tannehill briefly outlines what is involved in narrative criticism:

<sup>245</sup> See, generally, Walter Wink's assessment of the areas that historical-criticism and other critical methodologies do not cover when used at the exclusion of other approaches. Wink calls for interdisciplinary and more inclusive approaches to biblical-criticism. See W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1973.

<sup>246</sup> See H.W. Willimon, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1990, 11.

<sup>247</sup> M.A. Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, 96.

<sup>248</sup> Powell quotes from E.J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1937, 187. On Luke's gift for storytelling, see also G.F. Nuttall, *The Moment of Recognition: Luke As Story-Teller*, London, Athlone Press, 1978. We have already made reference to how Powell (*What Are They Saying About Acts?*), in reviewing Pervo's *Profit With Delight*, notes that according to that work Luke-Acts is "an ancient novel written to entertain its readers", and he also points to the preponderance in Acts for "harrowing escapes from peril, travel to exotic locations, and the working of fantastic miracles. Palace intrigue, mob scenes, adventurous voyages and shipwrecks are all standard novelistic features. Humor and wit also abound, as do what Pervo regards as burlesque and rowdy episodes (5:17-25; 12:5-17; 16:16-18; 19:14-16; 19:21-20:1; 23:6-10)" (:11-12).

<sup>249</sup> R.I. Pervo, *Profit With Delight*, 11.

Telling a story involves "narrative rhetoric." The narrator constructs a narrative world which readers are invited to inhabit imaginatively, a world constructed according to certain values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are intended to be appealing and convincing. This is especially true of a story as serious as a gospel...the story is constructed to influence its readers and...there are particular literary techniques used for this purpose.<sup>250</sup>

L.T. Johnson has reviewed W.S. Kurz's *Reading Luke-Acts* (1993) as a work that "provides a reliable guide to the overall narrative of Luke's two-volume work, demonstrating how attention to narrator perspective adds richness to the reading". Kurz's work has contributed to the understanding that, through its various levels of nuance, narrative criticism can help shed some light on some key issues, the understanding of which has long evaded scholars.<sup>251</sup>

The general method of narrative criticism is to try to interpret stories by paying particular attention to the ways in which they are told.<sup>252</sup> As distinct from rhetorical criticism, which attempts to determine the effect of a work of literature on its original audience, the goal of narrative criticism is, instead, to ascertain the effect that the story will have on a reader of any time or place. In other words, the goal of narrative criticism is to establish the effect the story will have on its 'implied' reader.<sup>253</sup>

The number of scholars who have applied the rhetorical and narrative critical approaches to the study of Luke-Acts has grown tremendously in the last few decades. A.N. Wilder has been credited with setting the initial impetus, in the period from World War II to the present, by calling attention to the formal, literary, and aesthetic

<sup>250</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>251</sup> W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 2-3. See especially on page 3.

<sup>252</sup> For a development of this view, see W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, especially pages 9-16, in which some of the key concepts of narrative criticism are defined and explained. See also in this context M.A. Powell's *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (:99-107), in which he gives a brief but clear description of some of the most significant features of narrative criticism. In addition, some of the important media studies on which the method is based, such as W.C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983); S. Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978); and E. Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London, Routledge, 1992) give some valuable insights into literary criticism in general, and rhetorical and narrative criticism in particular.

<sup>253</sup> On the 'implied' reader, or what is at times referred to as the 'ideal reader', see S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 147-151. Tannehill (*The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 6-7), speaks further of the distinction that literary scholars make between author, implied author, and narrator: "The author is the person external to the work who, among other things, wrote the work...The 'implied author' is the kind of person who would write this kind of work, which affirms certain values and beliefs and follows certain norms...The 'narrator' is an instrument used for getting the story told".

qualities of the New Testament.<sup>254</sup> Wilder set a trend that quickly caught the imagination of scholars disaffected with the more traditional approaches to Lucan research. Among these we can cite only a few.

Among the earliest disciples of the new critical approach was C.H. Talbert, who is credited with spearheading the 'post-Conzelmann' shift in Lucan studies. After a lifetime of scholarship that had remained faithful to the traditional approaches to Luke-Acts (until the 'change', Talbert had continued to use redaction criticism as his basic methodological tool, which he applied first to Luke-Acts and later switched to the Pauline literature), Talbert departed from the method of redaction criticism and extensively explored the narrative of Luke-Acts from the perspective of literary style and patterns.<sup>255</sup> Noting scholarship's apparent neglect of the formal patterns and literary features of Luke-Acts, Talbert pleaded for a new methodology which would allow scholars to "investigate certain of the formal patterns of Luke-Acts...in such a way as to see them within Luke-Acts as a whole and in the author's environment".<sup>256</sup>

R.C. Tannehill presents in two volumes a study of Luke-Acts that uses modern literary theory to interpret each pericope within the context of the narrative as a whole.<sup>257</sup> Tannehill says that while he does not view narrative criticism as an exclusive method that requires the rejection of all other methods, he makes use of it because of his desire to be sensitive to the ways in which the text is leading the reader, and especially

in order to understand this narrative's message, a message that cannot be confined to theological statements but encompasses a rich set of attitudes and images that are embedded in the story and offered for our admiration and imitation.<sup>258</sup>

Objections to both rhetorical and narrative-critical approaches to Luke-Acts have so far been few but quite loud. The strongest objection centres on what is perceived by

<sup>254</sup> See W.A. Beardslee, "Recent Literary Criticism", in E.J. Epp & G.W. MacRae (eds.), *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, 1989, 176-177.

<sup>255</sup> See R.C. Tannehill, *Literary Patterns*.

<sup>256</sup> R.C. Tannehill, 5.

<sup>257</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*.

<sup>258</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2, 4. According to the Tannehill, "The vital issue in the study of Acts is not whether it is historically accurate but whether it promotes values worthy of respect and presents models worthy of imitation" (:3). In his view, such moral edification is more obtainable through the use of the narrative-critical approach rather than the historical or even the theological (in the sense of sermonizing) approach.

some scholars to be a very strong subjective element in both critical approaches. After all, by what objective criteria does one decide how a given text ought to be (or was expected by the writer to be) received by the readers? Indeed, Tannehill, himself a strong proponent of the literary method, implicitly acknowledges the danger of subjectivism inherent in the method:

From words on a page we must reconstruct a narrative world which probably differs from our own. This imaginative process includes a realm of free play...No author can completely control what readers will find in the text. If these discoveries or inventions do not obscure the text's main emphases, the author and other interpreters would do well to be tolerant.<sup>259</sup>

The very idea of a so-called 'implied' reader or "implied author" has proved to be quite problematic. This is one area that still remains unsatisfactorily addressed by the various proponents of the literary approach to Luke-Acts.

As we have seen, the question of the narrative unity of Luke and Acts as espoused by Tannehill, among others, still remains a topic for scholarly disagreement in spite of the fact that all agree that both books were the product of one person. The objection is raised that contending for the narrative unity for either of these books, much less for both together, overlooks the fact that both are actually edited collections of different source materials.<sup>260</sup> The same argument is extended by Parsons and Pervo to the question of the 'generic unity' of Luke and Acts: Do the two writings, they ask, belong to the same genre of literature?<sup>261</sup> Rhetorical and narrative-criticism scholars have not so far been able to agree on this question which is, of course, related to the broader and more complex question as to what genre the book of Acts actually belongs.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>259</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 9.

<sup>260</sup> Such, for example, is the argument of S.D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989, 29-38.

<sup>261</sup> See Parsons and Pervo's discussion in *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*, 13-16.

<sup>262</sup> Witherington raises these questions in his commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles*: "The discussion of the genre of the Acts of the Apostles has taken many turns in the twentieth century. Are we dealing with some sort of Hellenistic historical monograph, or should Acts, especially the concluding sea travel adventures of Paul, be evaluated in light of ancient romances? Could Acts be seen as some sort of biographical narrative, or perhaps as a scientific treatise?" (:2-3). His conclusion is that "Luke-Acts bears some strong resemblances to earlier Greek historiographic works in form and method and general arrangement of material, as well as some similarities to Hellenized Jewish historiography in content and general apologetic aims" (:39).

In German scholarship the 2001 publication of C.G. Müller's *Mehr als ein Prophet: Die Charakterzeichnung Johannes des Täufers im lukanischen Erzählwerk* marked the development of a different literary approach to Lucan studies. Müller sought to establish that in his presentation of John the Baptist and Jesus the author of Luke-Acts followed a long established model of the portrayal of literary characters in comparative and contrasting doubles. Müller builds upon the characterization styles of Aristotle, Theophrastus and, in a particular way, the double biographies of Plutarch's *Lives*. With particular reference to Luke-Acts Müller cites among the insights that inspired him the statement by A. George that "L'originalité de Luc est d'avoir développé ce thème sous la forme d'une *synkrisis* grecque."<sup>263</sup> Müller follows K. Berger in decrying the situation in which "synkrisis sei in der Lukasexegese bisher "zu wenig gewürdigt" worden".<sup>264</sup> This state of affairs, says Müller, "muß nicht so bleiben".

In brief, Müller sees in the character portrayal of Luke-Acts a conscious "Vergleichung" or "Gegenüberstellung" of the protagonists by the author. Thus is to be understood, for example, in the way in which Martha and Mary are presented in Luke 10:38-42, the one in contrast to the other. But of course the greatest synkristic characterization in Luke-Acts, according to Müller, is to be seen in the double biographies of John the Baptist and Jesus. Müller notes that

Neben Jesus von Nazaret ist Johannes der Täufer die einzige Person im lukanischen Doppelwerk, deren gesamter Lebenslauf von der Geburt über Worte und Taten im öffentlichen Leben bis zum Tod und Weiterwirken über den Tod hinaus erzählt wird...Man kann bei Lukas nicht nur für Jesus, sondern auch im Blick auf Johannes von einer "Porträterzählung" sprechen...<sup>265</sup>

Müller further notes how, for example, in the early chapters of the Third Gospel John and Jesus are presented in parallel narrative, and how from that point on the author of Luke-Acts establishes a "Zusammengehörigkeit von Jesus und Johannes".<sup>266</sup> Müller concludes his study of the synkristic presentation of John and Jesus in Luke-Acts by stating that

<sup>263</sup> As quoted by C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 59.

<sup>264</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 59.

<sup>265</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 75.

<sup>266</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 297.



Lukas zeichnet in seinem Erzählwerk nicht nur ein Lebensbild Jesu von Nazaret, sondern auch ein Lebensbild Johannes des Täufer. Johannes ist neben Jesus die einzige Hauptfigur des lukanischen Doppelwerks, deren gesamter Lebenslauf, von den besonderen Umständen seiner Geburt bis hin zu seinem Tod und seinem Weiterwirken über den Tod hinaus, erzählt wird.<sup>267</sup>

In Müller Luke-Acts is above all a *bios*, a double biography of the lives of John and Jesus. John is essentially a character in a narrative drama, and a character whose main role is to showcase the hero of the plot, namely Jesus of Nazareth. John is not presented on his own individual terms.

The strength of Plutarch's double bios in his *Lives* lies in the richness (some would say detail) of the historical background in which he situates his protagonists. Though Müller expressly sets out to present a *Gegenüberstellung* between John and Jesus that is inspired by Plutarch's *Lives*, there is little effort in Müller to place the protagonists within a recognizable formative context that might help to better explain the differences (and indeed the similarities) between John and Jesus. It is clearly inadequate to study narrative (as Müller does) without at the same time taking into account the social and/or historical setting within which the narrative is played out. We have noted H.C. Waetjen's caution against "misconstruction and misinterpretation" when areas of biblical studies normally reserved to the social sciences are neglected.<sup>268</sup>

### 3.3 Luke-Acts: History, Theology and Literature

Notwithstanding the dissenting voices raised against the literary approaches to the bible in general and to Luke-Acts in particular, the positive contributions made by the rhetorical and narrative critical approaches to Lucan studies have been ably defended by the proponents of these critical methodologies. It has been noted, for example, how narrative analysis applies to narratives of all genres, be they historical, fictional, or theological. It can therefore be applied to Luke-Acts without having first to solve the dispute over the precise genre of Luke's writings. This does not, however, mean that narrative criticism is divorced from concern for theological and pastoral interpretation. From the point of view of biblical narrative criticism, the scriptural

<sup>267</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 296.

<sup>268</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x.

texts are not just read for their aesthetic value, but the narrative approach attempts to transmit the theological message in terms of its effects. Indeed, according to Kurz:

narrative analysis can throw new light on the following issues and passages that have continued to elude consensus among Lukan interpreters: the prologues of Luke and Acts; the role of Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1); the kinds of narrators, including the notoriously difficult "we" narrator first appearing in Acts 16:10; the function and discrepancies of the three versions of Paul's conversion narrative in Acts 9, 22, and 26; the ending of Acts and overlap between the end of Luke and beginning of Acts...<sup>269</sup>

In effect, Kurz's position is that narrative criticism can take care of some of the major issues (such as are underlined in the surveys of Gasque, Bovon, and Mattill) that have eluded scholars for centuries. Kurz is convinced that "contemporary literary criticism appears to offer many advantages"<sup>270</sup> over the historical-critical method for the study of biblical texts in general, and for the study of Luke-Acts in particular.

Tannehill concurs with Kurz. Tannehill is of the view that

the recent development of narrative criticism of the gospels, the result of extensive borrowing from non-biblical literary criticism, opens new opportunities... Luke-Acts is very familiar to those who have studied it at length, and familiar issues have come to dominate Lukan scholarship. But I am convinced that accents will be differently placed and questions differently posed if Luke-Acts is approached as a unified narrative with the help of narrative criticism.<sup>271</sup>

This position was echoed a few years later by J. Starobinski, who maintained that often the dynamics of narrative shifts in the storyline can uncover dimensions missed in traditional exegesis.<sup>272</sup>

### 3.4 *Literary Approaches to John the Baptist*

Literary-critical studies on John the Baptist have largely been related to his function in the context of the Gospel narratives. In respect of Luke-Acts, some scholars have proposed that in order to understand the role of John the Baptist in this work its purpose be considered as a starting point. They suggest that it is the intention of the author and the genre of the text that will determine both the way the narrative of

<sup>269</sup> W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 3.

<sup>270</sup> W.S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 5-6.

<sup>271</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 1.

<sup>272</sup> Cited by W.A. Beardslee, "Recent Literary Criticism", in E.J. Epp & G.W. McRae, *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, 187.

Luke-Acts is read as well as the way in which the role of John the Baptist as a character in the story is to be interpreted. C.H. Talbert has proposed that if John the Baptist is to be understood within Luke-Acts he must be studied in relation to narrative text as a whole, and this may be best achieved through literary criticism, a process in which both the reader and the object of enquiry (in this case John the Baptist) must feel at home within the narrative text.<sup>273</sup>

According to C.H. Talbert, "Luke-Acts belongs to the ancient biographical tradition."<sup>274</sup> In bibliographical works, such as Luke-Acts is said to be, the works and words of the key characters and heroes are narrated "with the intent that they be emulated...with imagination and conviction."<sup>275</sup> In this statement Talbert echoes R.C. Tannehill, a major literary-critic of Luke-Acts, in his assertion that Luke-Acts was written to promote values to be imitated.<sup>276</sup> Viewed in this light, figures like John the Baptist and other characters in the narrative are portrayed above all as models and examples to be emulated. Tannehill proposes that the "vital issue" behind the study of Luke-Acts from a literary-critical perspective "is not whether it is historically accurate but whether it promotes values worthy of respect and presents models worthy of imitation."<sup>277</sup> This promotion of values can be evidenced in the attitudes and images that are embedded in the narrative text.

Viewed from the perspective of his narrative role in Luke-Acts, John the Baptist is said by literary-critical scholars to be a crucial link that runs through the text and gives it continuity. Tannehill sees this narrative function of John the Baptist in the way in which John initiates a ministry that continues throughout Luke-Acts and beyond. The readers and hearers of Luke-Acts are continually reminded of this by the way in which words, phrases and themes used of John the Baptist are taken up by Jesus or his followers. This narrative device, according to Tannehill, is seen, for example, in how

<sup>273</sup> C.H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, New York, Crossroad, 1982, 2-3. See also C. H. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 2, 4, in which the author proposes that Luke-Acts be studied "in terms of narrative rhetoric."

<sup>274</sup> C.H. Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 2.

<sup>275</sup> C.H. Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 5.

<sup>276</sup> See R.C. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 2, 3.

<sup>277</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 2, 3.

Jesus and his witnesses, in fact, take over and continue the message of John the Baptist, and the narrator sometimes uses phrases which remind us of this fact. The task of "proclaiming...repentance for release of sins" (3:3) remains central throughout Luke-Acts.<sup>278</sup>

Tannehill further notes how

Other phrases used to describe the mission of John the Baptist are reused in describing the work of Jesus' followers, suggesting that they are continuing the work of John...The scriptural task of preparing the way, which was originally John's according to 3:4 and 7:27, is continued by Jesus' followers. The preachers in Acts also continue John's work. At the end of Peter's first sermon, the hearers ask, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37), repeating the crowd's response to John (Luke 3:10), and Peter replies, "Repent and be baptized...for release of your sins" (Acts 2:38, cf. Luke 3:3).<sup>279</sup>

It is noted how the speeches in Acts explicitly recall the work of John the Baptist, as when, for example, John's baptism is used by Peter to date the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Acts 1:22; 10:37.

From his literary-critical study of the narrative of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts Tannell has concluded that

there is a continuity "between the mission of John and the mission of Jesus and his followers. What is initiated by the word of God to John continues through the rest of the narrative. This applies especially to the proclamation of repentance for release of sins, but there is also continuity between specific aspects of John's preaching in 3:7-17 and the preaching of Jesus."<sup>280</sup>

We have noted earlier the literary-critical approach of C.G. Müller in his *Mehr als ein Prophet: Die Charakterzeichnung Johannes des Täufers im lukanischen Erzählwerk*, by which Müller seeks to show that Luke-Acts is a *bios* in the tradition of Plutarch's *Lives*. According to Müller, the author of Luke-Acts consciously presents John the Baptist always in terms of comparison and contrast with Jesus, and it is in the dynamics of this σύγκρισις that the reader and hearer is able to appreciate the literary function of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts. In a comparative analysis of texts relevant to both John the Baptist and Jesus, Müller has concluded that

<sup>278</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 1, 48.

<sup>279</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 1, 48-49.

<sup>280</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 1, 52.

Wenn als narrativer Inhalt des lukanischen Doppelwerks die Geschichte Gottes mit seinem Volk benannt werden kann, so kommt in dieser Geschichte nicht allein Jesus, dem Christus Gottes, eine Hauptrolle zu. Seiner Geschichte aufs engste verbunden erscheint bei Lukas Johannes der Täufer als sein Gegenüber. Er ist in dem von Lukas gezeichneten Bild weit "mehr als ein Prophet" (Lk 7,26). In ihm begegnet auch heutigen Lesern des lukanischen Erzählwerks ein "Leben für den Kommenden".<sup>281</sup>

#### 4. SOCIAL-CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LUKE-ACTS

##### 4.1 Introduction

In the foregoing survey of Lucan studies, we have noted how, for decades, the field was dominated by the 'Luke the Historian' and 'Luke the Theologian' schools. While we may give qualified support to V.K. Robbins' observation that

Prior to 1970, data in the Bible was either 'historical' or 'theological', it could represent historical theology or theological history but not something else. The battles, victories and defeats – drawn in historical versus theological lines – kept other disciplines from entering the battlefield...with any kind of status,<sup>282</sup>

it is necessary to acknowledge that a number of pre-1970's writers had already undertaken social-scientific or social description approaches to biblical studies, and this trend has continued to blossom post-1970's. Some of these scholars were innovative pioneers in the field whose works became a guide for both method and result in what we might call the 'social criticism' of religion in general, and biblical literature in particular,<sup>283</sup> whether that 'social criticism' was from a historical perspective<sup>284</sup> or from a scientific one.<sup>285</sup> For both methods the social experience is fundamental, and engagement with it allows the reader to reconstruct various social dimensions of the biblical text in a way that provides the reader with a framework for

<sup>281</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 310.

<sup>282</sup> V.K. Robbins, "Social-Scientific Criticism and Literary Studies" in P.F. Esler (ed.), *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context*, London, Routledge, 1995, 274-275.

<sup>283</sup> See also B. Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970, 170.

<sup>284</sup> See for example, and among others, the works of A.J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1969; R.M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1977; and R.F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980.

<sup>285</sup> An example of works generally acknowledged to be 'social scientific' is seen in, among many others, G. Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978; J.H. Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983; W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*; B.J. Malina & J.H. Neyrey in their joint book, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew*, Sonoma, Polebridge Press, 1988. This is of course a very selective listing in a field that is expanding rapidly.



understanding social and religious phenomena that are different from those found in the dynamics of modern life. In a similar way, engagement with the social or human context of the text allows the reader to devise hermeneutical tools that make it possible for the text to be relevantly applied to the reader's own 'world'.

R.M. Grant, a representative of the social description school, argues for sensitivity to the social dimensions of early Christianity, especially if we are to appreciate matters of "everyday Christian practicality".<sup>286</sup>

J.H. Elliot of the social-scientific school is strong in his argument that the traditional literary, theological and historical questions in biblical studies cannot be answered satisfactorily without making a "determination of the sum of its features which make it a vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequences."<sup>287</sup>

While the subtitle of the present work indicates that one of the methodological legs on which the study stands is a social description one, it is important to note the distinction between social description and a social-scientific study. Social description works without the explicit use of models or of specific theories, while social-scientific criticism works with explicit models and theories to be proved. These models and theories are applied to the biblical text in an attempt to reconstruct the social worlds behind it. Social description works with generalizations of social actualities or everyday practicalities. It seemed clear to us that the questions raised in the present study would be best answered through the application of a flexible methodology that is not restricted to specific models or theories for, as A. J. Malherbe has noted, "we should strive to know as much as possible about the actual social circumstances...before venturing theoretical descriptions or explanations of them".<sup>288</sup>

<sup>286</sup> In his effort to experience this "everyday Christian practicality" Grant explores various areas of life, such as, among others, population, occupations, property, poverty and relationship to political leadership. Grant studies these areas as a historian and not as a sociologist even though Susan R. Garret has noted, "several times [he] borders on sociological analysis: for example when he discusses the possible relationship between millenarianism and the rejection of private property (chap. 5), or when he treats the "triumph of Christianity" as an "economic matter" (chap. 7)". See S.R. Garret, "Sociology of Early Christianity" in *ABD* 6 (1992), 94.

<sup>287</sup> J.H. Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless*, 8.

<sup>288</sup> A.J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 20.

The distinction between social description and social-scientific study is described by T. Schmeller as

one between description and explanation, i.e. between the collection of historical material and the interpretation of that material with the help of sociological theory. It is reasonable to ascribe to social history the depiction of typical interpersonal behavior, and to sociology the interpretation of the broader social functions of this behavior.

It has been noted, however, that the distinction between social description and social-scientific study has not always been easy to maintain. T. Schmeller has, for example, astutely observed that "No assembling of material is free of theory, and not every theory is applicable to all forms of material."<sup>289</sup> Nonetheless, the application of these methodologies allows the reader to reconstruct and engage with various social dimensions of the biblical text, as well as with the reality represented by that text.

For the scholars of the social description or social-historical 'school' in general, there is an endeavour to study either biblical characters or events within particular social and cultural milieux. In this way the material and cultural ties that link the biblical characters and/or events to particular times and places are elucidated. These aspects of the social description approach provide an important rationale behind the methodology that is adopted in the project of the present study.

When it comes to scholars of the social-scientific 'school', one thinks of such pioneering scholars as P.L. Berger,<sup>290</sup> R.W. Smith,<sup>291</sup> H.C. Kee.<sup>292</sup> This last, Howard Clark Kee, is especially distinguished among biblical scholars for his ability in combining archaeological research with literary study in search of the social foundations of the biblical world. Not satisfied with the abstract data gathered from his earlier interest in archaeology, he moved to the social sciences so as to study the relationship of religion and society in antiquity, thus making his archaeological insights come alive within the social-scientific milieu of ancient Mediterranean society. Scholars of the social-scientific school, in general, may also address

<sup>289</sup> T. Schmeller, "Sociology and New Testament Studies", *DBI* II, 489.

<sup>290</sup> P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York, Anchor, 1967.

<sup>291</sup> R.W. Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*, New York, Ktav, 1957.

<sup>292</sup> H.C. Kee, *The Living World of the New Testament*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1960. See also H.C. Kee, *Understanding the New Testament*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1965.

traditional social historical issues and/or theological issues, but they do so from methodological models more commonly associated with sociologists, anthropologists or social psychologists.

Modern trends have been moving away from the earlier and often polemical approaches of the two schools ('history' and 'theology') and have sought to widen the platform of Lucan studies and approach them from a broader perspective that includes, among other approaches, recourse to literary theory as well as to the social sciences or social description and reconstruction. The names representing this last trajectory have multiplied in the last two or so decades. The *forte* of the new approach is that while it incorporates the strong points of both the traditional 'history' and 'theology' (or, to paraphrase Robbins, 'history *versus* theology') approaches into its methodology, it recognizes, first and foremost, that Luke-Acts is a work written in time and space. The major breakthrough has been the realization that, in the words of R.L. Rohrbaugh, "Mediterranean society is the NT's original social location and therefore the ethnography of that region is critical to all that follows."<sup>293</sup>

There has been a realization that much more lay behind an informed interpretation of Luke-Acts than merely historical or theological considerations; namely the 'social distance' that separates today's reader of Luke-Acts from the people to whom and for whom the work was written. Rohrbaugh, in the context of the New Testament in general, succinctly expresses this 'new discovery' when he says,

The variety of critical methods...have concentrated primarily on historical, linguistic, and, more recently, literary issues. All these methods are necessary and helpful; yet in spite of what they have taught us, it turns out they are not enough. Now social-critics, working on the anthropology of the ancient Mediterranean world, have begun to realize the magnitude of the *social* distance between the NT and ourselves.<sup>294</sup>

It is precisely because of this 'social distance' between modern reader and ancient reader or listener that an understanding of patterns of social interaction and social relations is obviously basic to reading Mediterranean literature and to relating to ancient Mediterranean society, a process which Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a 'fusion

<sup>293</sup> R.L. Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1966, 7.

<sup>294</sup> R.L. Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences*, 2.

of past and present horizons'. This understanding in turn generates the insight that reading the Bible is thus in fact an exercise in cross-cultural communication.<sup>295</sup> Richard Rohrbaugh<sup>296</sup> compares an extra-cultural reading of the Bible (i.e. reading the bible outside of its ancient Mediterranean social context) with Psalm 137:4's reference to "singing the Lord's song in a strange land", as very often in our times the Bible is in fact read in strange lands and by people to whom it was never addressed. Mediterranean society is the original social and cultural location of the New Testament; hence the ethnography of that region is critical for our understanding of the New Testament message. Gadamer calls this process of covering the social distance between the modern reader of the New Testament and the people of the ancient Mediterranean world for whom and to whom the New Testament message was originally written a 'fusion' of two horizons. This, for Gadamer, is the end-result of the new hermeneutic path that he outlines. He insists upon the necessity of understanding the horizon of the past, which in our case is represented by the New Testament texts, in order to understand the horizon of the present. For Gadamer, the continual testing of our current outlook which produces the horizon of the present depends upon an encounter with our past and its traditions. In other words, we cannot know where we are unless we can appreciate where we have come from. Knowledge and understanding are the result of the fusion of these two horizons. By 'fusion of the two horizons' Gadamer does not, however, mean the assimilation of the horizons, but their co-existence in a state of continuous interaction.<sup>297</sup> Therefore in order to understand the horizon of the past (the primary function of the social-sciences as an exegetical and hermeneutical methodology), historical analysis is indispensable.

While the traditional positions (history and theology) often emphasized the 'either-or' approach in respect of the other, the approach that leans towards social description, or indeed towards the social-scientific study of Luke-Acts in general has appeared to create a more objective mind-set. The authors discussed below are a representative sample in a field that has in recent times put forward an increasingly more convincing

<sup>295</sup> See J.H. Elliott (*What Is Social-Scientific Criticism*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Press, 1993) for a full discussion of the need for cross-cultural study of the Bible, including methods and results of social-scientific criticism.

<sup>296</sup> R.L. Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences*, 2.

<sup>297</sup> For a fuller description of the horizons of the past, their fusion and continuous interaction with the horizons of the present see H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1979, 273ff, 337ff.

argument in favour of the indispensability of a social descriptive methodology in exegesis and hermeneutics. After all, argue some of these writers, Luke-Acts offers us

many 'snapshots' that permit us to glimpse that distant, foreign, vivid and sometimes even dangerous world in which the Christian messengers of the first century after Christ moved.<sup>298</sup>

Some writers, like Howard Clark Kee before them, have been instrumental in setting new trends that have defined, and will continue to define the new social-scientific approach to Lucan studies for some time to come.

#### **4.2 Social-Critical Studies on Luke-Acts**

The social description, reconstruction, analysis and interpretation of the New Testament world in general, and of Luke-Acts in particular has been under way for some decades. What follows is an eclectic sampling of some of the works that offer studies on Luke-Acts from either the perspective of social description or of social-scientific criticism. Lucan studies have in general tended to be approached from the perspectives of social and cultural anthropology, politics, and economics.

Economics, which necessarily takes into consideration the various economic strata and social location and mobility within the Roman Empire, with special emphasis on their impact in Palestine, has added a new dimension to Lucan studies. Examples in this category abound. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann's combined editorial work in *God of the Lowly* (1984) provides an analysis which is a model for a socio-theological critique of Luke's community. The book's main thrust is divine solidarity with the oppressed, and a system of justice measured by the treatment of society's most vulnerable members, for example women, the sick, and social outcasts. Halvor Moxnes' *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (1988) with its descriptive sub-title "Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel" offers a social-scientific study of Luke's work in its original context, an approach that brings out the significance of Luke's radical social

<sup>298</sup> H.-J. Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2000, 2.



message, namely a world of new relationships according to the 'economy of the kingdom of God'.

Both of Cassidy's works, *Jesus, Politics and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel* (1983) and *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (1987) explicate the social and political contents of Luke-Acts. The books present early Christians as ready to denounce every social and political stance contrary to the message of Jesus, and gives examples of how to cope with being persecuted and tried before the Roman Empire's political officials.

Esler's *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (1989) makes use of sociology and anthropology to study Luke's theology as a response to the social and political pressures upon the community for which he was writing. Esler's work offers a new paradigm for generating a theology of Luke attuned to the social and political realities of the time which impact on contemporary Christian communities. The book shows how theories of sociologists and anthropologists can be used as an aid to a fruitful understanding of the New Testament in general, and Luke-Acts in particular.

In their combined work *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (1986), Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann set out to correct what they view as an unfortunate tendency in the search for the historical Jesus, namely the tendency to isolate Jesus from his disciples, from his immediate context, and from Judaism. Jesus, they argue, is inseparable from the context within which he lived and worked. The book offers an informative socio-historical interpretation of the Jesus movement by focusing, among other areas, on Luke's Gospel.

The works of J.H. Neyrey and others have in recent times made a tremendous contribution to the social-scientific study of Luke-Acts. D. Rhoads comments in a review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*<sup>299</sup> that

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<sup>299</sup> Edited by Neyrey (1991), with contributions from well-known biblical social-scientists such as B.J. Malina, R.L. Rohrbaugh, J.H. Elliott, H. Moxnes, V.K. Robbins, M. McVann, D.E. Oakman, and J.J. Pilch.

This is clearly the best collection of articles available from the New Testament scholars employing methods of interpretation from cultural anthropology. The writers introduce a wide range of innovative models to unravel the culture of the Biblical world. They offer the first comprehensive analysis of a single New Testament text from the perspective of the social sciences. This highly readable volume will be essential for anyone eager to experience the flood of insights coming from recent social study of the New Testament.<sup>300</sup>

The writers take the reader through social psychology, social institutions, and social structures, to the social dynamics that Luke uncovers in the presentation of his material, and by so doing they provide the reader with powerful tools for a social-scientific re-creation of the First Century scenarios within which Luke's narrative unfolds.

The five-volumed series *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*<sup>301</sup> is possibly the most comprehensive series on Lucan studies. Not since Schürer's *Beginnings of Christianity* and other older studies on Luke-Acts has the scholarly community been treated to such a veritable feast of inter-disciplinary research by highly qualified authors. The series takes, as its starting point, the understanding that Luke-Acts is rooted within the setting of the peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean area in the first century C.E. This allows for a multi-disciplinary approach to Luke-Acts that takes account of ethnic, regional, social, cultural, ideological, political, and theological contexts. Overall, the series provides an essential background for the understanding of the world behind the text of not only the Lucan literature (especially the Acts of the Apostles), but of other New Testament writings as well.

A less critical application of the social-scientific method or the social description approach to Luke-Acts, it seems to us, runs the risk of creating the impression that the author of Luke-Acts was perhaps familiar with the part of the Mediterranean world in which he set his narrative – especially the Gospel narrative. The author of Luke-Acts has been noted, on occasion, to be not well informed of the geography of, and conditions in Palestine.<sup>302</sup> What we have in Luke-Acts is a cross-pollination of

<sup>300</sup> Review on the back cover (jacket) of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*.

<sup>301</sup> B.W. Winter, I.H. Marshall, D.W.J. Gill (1993-1996). E. Schürer's own work, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. (1973-1987), though purportedly historical in content and method, offers some useful social and anthropological insights into what is commonly referred to as the inter-testamental period.

<sup>302</sup> See, for example, R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963; W.G. Kümmel, 1985, *Introduction to the New Testament*; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*,

cultures and social backgrounds. In other words, the author of Luke-Acts is writing from his social and cultural context about another social and cultural environment of which, as it would appear, he had little hands-on experience. Thus, the application of the social-scientific method to Luke-Acts would need to make a careful distinction between the background of the author, and of the context in which the narrative is actually set. A more nuanced application of the social-scientific method to Luke-Acts in relation to the Mediterranean world is called for if we accept with the majority of scholars that the author of Luke-Acts was from Antioch, that is to say from a centre of the Hellenistic culture, a place to which peripheral outposts like Palestine would have held no particular significance. Such an approach would necessarily need to juxtapose the author's own social context with the socio-cultural context in which he sets his narrative. In other words, what we have in Luke-Acts is the author's own interpretation of the socio-cultural reality within which his narrative takes place – an interpretation which, as has already been noted above, may not always be an accurate representation of the socio-cultural reality in which he has set his story.

R.A. Horsley and J.S. Hanson<sup>303</sup> have, for instance, noted a number of limitations inherent in social-scientific method in the study of the ancient world in general. Among these limitations they note, (a) the paucity of sources available for the social-scientific study of ancient cultures, such as those of the Ancient Near East (he notes, for example, that “the Jewish peasantry left no literary remains”)<sup>304</sup>, (b) that the analytical tools for the social-scientific study are still developing, (c) the tendency towards “anthropological and sociological generalizations”, against which they caution.<sup>305</sup>

#### **4.3 Luke-Acts and Social-Scientific Theory**

While the present study endeavours to study John the Baptist within a particular social and cultural milieu using the methodology of social description, we may nonetheless

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London, SCM Press Ltd., 1985. In the present times there is hardly a modern commentary on Luke-Acts that fails to dwell on this point.

<sup>303</sup> See R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1999.

<sup>304</sup> R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, xxx. The authors further note that “our principal source of our fragmentary knowledge remains the reports of Josephus in his histories of the Jewish people and the Jewish War. But even this source is complicated by the fact that he is biased against, and even hostile to, the common people” (:xxxix).

<sup>305</sup> R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, xxxi-xxxii.

note two scholars in particular who have sought to apply Leon Festinger's social-scientific theory of cognitive dissonance<sup>306</sup> to biblical studies. R.P. Carroll has attempted to apply this theory to studies in Old Testament prophecy,<sup>307</sup> while J.G. Gager has attempted the same in New Testament studies.<sup>308</sup>

R.P. Carroll has made a direct connection between biblical studies and the theory of cognitive dissonance. He has sought to apply the term dissonance in his study of biblical prophecy.<sup>309</sup> He tries to explore the prophetic traditions by means of dissonance resolution models because of his conviction that "*dissonance gives rise to hermeneutic*".<sup>310</sup> Carroll takes dissonance to mean "the gap between expectation (belief) and reality",<sup>311</sup> a perspective which helps him to "indicate problems of prediction and fulfilment in prophecy".<sup>312</sup> Carroll sees the dissonance arising out of unfulfilled prophecy thus:

The catastrophe of the exile did much to discredit prophecy as a movement central to the development of Israelite society...the failure of expectations of salvation and the poor response to Second Isaiah's visions created further problems for prophecy. The sweeping changes in political structures introduced by the Persian empire helped to diminish the role of the prophet in Judaeon society. All these changes brought about substantial changes in prophecy and slowly transformed it in the direction of apocalyptic...the transformation of prophecy into apocalyptic was assisted by the

<sup>306</sup> In the 1950's Leon Festinger propounded what was to become the most influential theory in social psychology, a theory that has generated much interest leading to many study and research projects. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has been applied widely, and with varying modifications, to such fields as psychology, educational sciences, and biblical studies. The theory of cognitive dissonance seeks to understand the essence of a noxious state brought about by post-decision making processes, a form of stress that Festinger refers to as dissonance. This occurs when there is an experience of inconsistency or disorder between expectation and experience. Disorder arises when two sets of beliefs are in disagreement, or when one cognition is disproved, contradicted, or cancelled out by another. When two cognitions, or two "items of knowledge" (these could be behaviour, beliefs or opinions) are in contradiction or cancel each other out, a situation of dissonance is said to exist between them, and the human organism automatically seeks means of reducing or resolving the inconsistency. In its simplest form Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is about modes of dissonance resolution or the restoration of the consistence, or balance, or congruity, or consonance between the dissonant elements. See Festinger's development and application of his theory of cognitive dissonance in L. Festinger, W. Riecken & S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1956; and L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1957.

<sup>307</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1979.

<sup>308</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1975.

<sup>309</sup> See R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 97.

<sup>310</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 124.

<sup>311</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 109.

<sup>312</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 110.

efforts of post-exilic prophecy to respond to the collapse of its hopes by means of reinterpretative changes in direction.<sup>313</sup>

Some other scholars have for a long time worked with the principles enunciated – at least in their broadest outlines – by L. Festinger, without necessarily formulating their approaches in the way that Festinger expressed them. Some scholars have, for example, noted that there is a direct connection between the apparent failure of the early Christians' eschatological expectations and their zealous missionary activities. For example, F. Hahn has noted how the death and resurrection of Jesus "awoke in the whole of the primitive Church a white-hot expectation of [the kingdom's] imminence, and how [it] had to be made known afresh to men."<sup>314</sup> In a similar vein, O. Cullmann put forward the point that, far from being paralyzed by an unrealized eschatology, the earliest Christian communities were galvanized into undertaking missionary activities on an unprecedented scale.<sup>315</sup> We have noted how, according to Festinger's theory, social support (as seen, for example, in the proselytizing that results from missionary activity – "an increase in proselytizing normally follows disconfirmation"<sup>316</sup>) and explanatory schemes (at times involving a shift in the interpretation of dissonant cognitions) are some of the possible techniques that a group may use in dissonance resolution. Not a few New Testament scholars have interpreted both the missionary endeavour of earliest Christianity as well as the development of Christian theology itself as Christianity's response to the untenable situation of the death on the cross of the long-awaited Messiah. Even when he rose from the dead, his subsequent 'disappearance' (ascension into heaven) had to be interpreted in a way that would strengthen his followers and infuse fresh zeal and hope in them. Thus the Messiah would return at some indeterminate future time, but in the meantime the Holy Spirit (sent by the Messiah) would, so to speak, hold the fort.

<sup>313</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 204-205.

<sup>314</sup> F. Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*, Naperville, A.R. Allenson, 1965, 51.

<sup>315</sup> See O. Cullmann, "Eschatology and Missions in the New Testament", in W.D Davies & D. Daube, *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1956, 409-421.

<sup>316</sup> See J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1975, 39. L. Festinger, H.W. Riecken & S. Schachter, (*When Prophecy Fails*) have noted in their study that proselytism is one of the most common techniques for resolution of dissonance. They state: "if more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct" (:2). The authors emphasis.



Perhaps the scholar who has more closely noted an intrinsic connection between eschatology, mission and the theory of cognitive dissonance, and one who has come closest to applying the theory of cognitive dissonance to some aspects of Luke-Acts has been J.G. Gager,<sup>317</sup> who contends that "the precise nature of [the connection between eschatology and mission] can be understood by appealing to the theory of cognitive dissonance."<sup>318</sup>

Briefly stated, Gager's position is that

the death of Jesus created a sense of cognitive dissonance, in that it seemed to disconfirm the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Even the event of the resurrection, which the Gospels present as having surprised the disciples every bit as much as the death, seems not to have eradicated these doubts. Thus, according to the theory, we may understand the zeal with which Jesus' followers pursued their mission as part of an effort to reduce dissonance, not just in the early years but for a considerable time thereafter.<sup>319</sup>

It must be noted, however, that Gager makes it quite clear that he does not "wish to claim that cognitive dissonance is the single explanation for either missionary activity or polemic against Judaism and paganism."<sup>320</sup>

In support of his contention, Gager expresses some elements of his position thus:

Jesus' death...was regarded by his followers as in some sense disconfirming beliefs and hopes that they had attached to him during his lifetime...the crucifixion of Jesus constituted a major obstacle to the conversion of many Jews...There are no signs that any group of Jews awaited a suffering Messiah, let alone one who would be crucified by Rome...insofar as the followers of Jesus shared the messianic views of their time, they were unprepared for the death of the one whom they believed to be the fulfillment of their messianic dreams.<sup>321</sup>

Specifically in relation to Luke-Acts, Gager cites Luke 24:21 to show how the death of Jesus was problematic for his followers from the beginning and for a long time after. Gager notes how, in early Christianity's effort to come to terms with the contradiction of a crucified Messiah,

<sup>317</sup> See J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, especially pages 37-49.

<sup>318</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 39.

<sup>319</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 42-43.

<sup>320</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 49.

<sup>321</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 41.

it is still possible to trace the process of rationalization whereby the early church sought to persuade others and itself that Jesus' death was both necessary and beneficial...we find the risen Jesus himself claiming that his death was both necessary and in accordance with the Scriptures as properly, i.e., in a Christian context, interpreted.<sup>322</sup>

Gager's observations are justified, certainly from the perspective of the theory on which they are based. And so, too, in our view, would be a carefully nuanced application of this model to John the Baptist. Might it not be said, for example, that the death of John similarly created a sense of dissonance in the popular perception, and that one of the possible ways in which the people of his time sought to resolve this was through a process of re-interpretation in which Jesus was seen to be a successor to John's programme? It is possible to see that this interpretation would later conveniently play into the hands of the pro-Jesus and anti-John (and anti-Jewish<sup>323</sup>) faction if we accept the view that the Gospel portrayal of John the Baptist represents the vanquished, subordinate John of the victorious side in the Jesus-John polemic of earliest Christianity.<sup>324</sup> The people of John's time who began to place their hopes on Jesus when John was no more "could never have imagined that the Church would subsume [John's] message."<sup>325</sup> The indications are, indeed, that before the Christians took Jesus over and, so to speak, claimed a monopoly over him he was, in fact, widely accepted by the Jews of his time and was popular among them, as had been John the Baptist. We read in the Gospel narratives of the (great) multitudes that were drawn to Jesus during his lifetime<sup>326</sup> and, indeed, even after his death. It is also to be kept in mind that the first people to believe in what Jesus had stood for, and the first to undertake missionary activity in his name were Jews.<sup>327</sup> This is understandable on one level if Jesus' ministry is seen to be a continuation of that of John the Baptist, as many scholars have long asserted. The rabid hatred of Jesus by

<sup>322</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 42. Gager notes the same process of rationalization in Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures...he was buried...he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive..."

<sup>323</sup> See J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 6-9. See also on page 12, where Taylor notes that "The Gospels' depiction of John was designed to sever him from the Jewish world around him so that his characterization as the precursor and pointer to Jesus would not be blurred by distractions."

<sup>324</sup> Such, as will be noted below, is the position of a number of scholars, among them C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John*, London, SPCK, 1958, 142; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971, 88; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982, 59-60.

<sup>325</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 8.

<sup>326</sup> See, for example, at Luke 6:17-19; 12:1; 9:11-17.

<sup>327</sup> See at Acts 2:37-41; 8:1-8; 13:1-3.

"the Jews" that is depicted in the Gospel narratives is a later Christian construct. Indeed, the indication is that Jesus was more popular among the Jews of his time than the Gospel narratives lead us to believe, and this was, at least partly, in no small measure due to his perceived links with John the Baptist. According to the text of Isaiah 40:3-5 which is applied to John (Luke 3:4-6), John was the voice proclaiming the advent of God and his judgment on humanity. But then Herod goes and silences the 'voice' by having John killed. There had been a popular hope and expectation that John might perhaps even be the long-awaited Messiah himself (the *χριστός* of Luke 3:15). Though John explicitly denies this (Luke 3:16-17), the popular hope is clearly still not diminished, as this is seen, for example, in the way that on more than one occasion Jesus is mistaken for John,<sup>328</sup> even after John was already dead. Surprisingly, Herod himself, of all people, is among those who think Jesus might be John *redivivus* (Luke 9:7-9)! The death of John disconfirmed whatever expectations had arisen around him in relation to his role in inaugurating the messianic age. It is quite conceivable that the populace who, according to Josephus, "were aroused to the highest degree by [John's] sermons [and] looked as if they would be guided by John in everything they did",<sup>329</sup> may have transferred, as one of their ways of dealing with the dissonance created by John's death, their expectations from John to Jesus. What John had been expected to do was now seen to be done by Jesus, and in this way the effects of John's death were neutralized. It is possible to see how John would have been interpreted as having been preparing the ground for Jesus, and so a potentially disruptive situation of dissonance was avoided. The transference of expectations from John to Jesus was part of a rationalization process in which the people of John's time sought to resolve the dissonance brought about by the apparent non-event of the messianic age that it had been hoped, on the basis of Isaiah 40:3-5, that John might inaugurate. John's early death, rather than paralyzing those who had hoped in his playing a decisive role in the salvation of Israel, was re-interpreted by them in the life and deeds of Jesus, whose own programme, as will be noted below, was perceived to be a continuation of that of John. We have noted how, according to Festinger's theory, one way of dissonance resolution is the reduction of the importance of one of the discrepant beliefs. In relation to John the Baptist, the possible transference of expectations generated around him from John to Jesus would have given Jesus a new

<sup>328</sup> See, for example, in Luke 9:7-9, 18-19.

<sup>329</sup> *Ant.* xviii.116-119.

'authority' over John. Festinger's other model of dissonance resolution, namely changing the dissonant belief in such a way that it forms part of the support system of a new belief, could also be applied to the way Jesus' popularity among the Jews of his time was based in part upon the popularity of John the Baptist before him. Certainly the application of the theory of cognitive dissonance to New Testament studies opens up new ground for investigation, especially as the theory may apply specifically to the relationship between John the Baptist, Jesus, and the nascent Christian movement. However, it is clear that a lot still remains to be done in this field before definitive conclusions can be drawn in any particular direction.

The same applies, in our view, to R.P. Carroll's innovative application of the theory of cognitive dissonance to the study of the emergence of apocalypticism as the result of "reinterpretative changes in direction" occasioned by the non-fulfillment of the prophetic promises.<sup>330</sup> Certainly the gap between expectation (the messianic age, to be ushered in by a prophetic precursor of Yahweh) and reality (death of the one perceived as the precursor) resulted in dissonance for the people of Israel, as well as for the nascent Christian community. For both groups, expectations were refuted by experience, but rather than bring about a paralysis in the people thus affected, the dissonance resulted in a re-interpretation of the prophetic promises in such a way that, for the Christians, the promises were seen as having been fulfilled in Jesus (and in the ongoing presence and action of the Holy Spirit) while for the Jewish people, the period of waiting for the dawning, in a definite epoch, of the messianic age foretold by the prophets became an ongoing wait for an indeterminate future event. The Elijah figure is still to come. This is seen in how, for example, in the celebration of the Passover Meal there is always a place left empty at table, set in readiness for the arrival of Elijah.

Carroll has noted that

The main relevance of dissonance theory for biblical studies is its handling of ways in which people respond to disconfirming information. Where there are expectations of a specific nature and where such expectations remain unfulfilled or are refuted by experience there dissonance is said to exist.<sup>331</sup>

<sup>330</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 205.

<sup>331</sup> R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 109.

Both the Old and the New Testaments can certainly be said to be *loci classici* for the study of stumped expectations, and thus of dissonance, as well as of the methods of re-interpretation of the primary data of belief (or the subject of the expectation) as a way of resolving the dissonance. In the Old Testament there is the failure of the expectations of salvation, while in the New Testament there is the apparent disconfirmation of a very imminent coming of Jesus. While Festinger's theory has certainly got its weaknesses,<sup>332</sup> it has nonetheless been widely adopted by social scientists across different fields of specialization, and has been widely acclaimed as an indispensable tool for the assessment of social and individual responses to situations of dissonance and what would normally be shattering experiences of disconfirmation of definitive belief systems. Carroll, whose own application of the theory is marked by a careful objectivity, notes that "the prodigious amount of research generated by the theory has led to important modifications...which have made it a more useful tool for the analysis of attitude change".<sup>333</sup> It must be said that the criticisms directed at the theory of cognitive dissonance have, in any case, tended to relate to what might be termed methodological naïveté in the early years of the development and application of the theory and therefore have not succeeded in discrediting the theory in its later methodological sophistication. Further development and research have modified or expanded the initial principles and methodological approaches and perspectives. It must, however, be noted that the precise parameters within which the theory of cognitive dissonance in its present form (and in any of its possible further development) can be applied to studies on Luke-Acts in general, and John the Baptist in particular still remain to be investigated and determined. For now, suffice it to say that, in their broadest terms, the perspectives drawn from the theory of cognitive dissonance may indeed offer a new social-scientific avenue for the interpretation of the biblical texts.

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<sup>332</sup> R.P. Carroll (*When Prophecy Failed*), for example, notes the "simplicity and inelegance [of the theory] as a conceptual statement" (:107). More specifically, he notes:

As the theory tends to work with two simple cognitions said to be in a dissonant relationship to one another experiments may be set up with great ease. However, the simplicity of dissonance theory may well be a self-defeating limitation as it is seldom possible to reduce the essentials of a complex social situation to just two opposing cognitions. (:106).

<sup>333</sup> C.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 107.



#### 4.4 *John the Baptist and Social Description*

While historical, theological and literary approaches have significantly contributed towards a deepened appreciation of the Lucan John the Baptist, there has been, especially in recent decades, a sustained recourse to social description as a possible aid to appreciating John from the perspectives of the social context and human history of his time. It must be said, however, that in comparison to the other approaches noted above, the approach that uses social description and reconstruction of John's world remains, at the present time, less investigated. This, as we have already noted, remains an area of the "fruitful field" in Lucan studies that has yet to be ploughed.

Among the various approaches that use social description and that are yielding helpful insights into the biblical narrative world is the discipline of archaeology. However, the status of archaeology as a 'science' is much debated, while it is viewed by some as a sub-branch of the ethnographic or cultural anthropology and human sciences. Be that as it may, its claim to specializing in tracing, dating and establishing of ancient levels of human and natural history would appear to support its claim to being some form of 'science'. We obviously cannot detain ourselves here with the claims and counter claims of this fight over names and qualifications. S. Gibson has said of his work that its purpose is to be "able to supply the archaeological *context* for the Biblical stories and events."<sup>334</sup> Noting that an enormous amount of new archaeological data relating to events and places relating both to John the Baptist and Jesus has emerged in recent years, Gibson believes the challenge now facing scholars is to investigate more closely the historical processes of John's and Jesus' times:<sup>335</sup>

There are a good number of sites associated with John the Baptist in Israel/Palestine and Jordan, notably Ain Karim, Ain el-Habis, various places in the Jordan Valley region, Machaerus and Sebaste, all of which have exciting archaeological features.<sup>336</sup>

Even though most of these "features" cannot be directly connected with John the Baptist, Gibson believes that he has excavated a cave that was used by John among the hills west of Jerusalem.<sup>337</sup> Not few, however, are the sceptical voices that have

<sup>334</sup> S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, 3.

<sup>335</sup> S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, 3-4.

<sup>336</sup> S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, 4.

<sup>337</sup> See *BAR* 31 (2005), 38-41, 58.

greeted Gibson's claims.<sup>338</sup> It must be noted, however, that Gibson's convictions have not yet withstood the test of time and of sustained critical scholarship. A 'wait-and-see' attitude might therefore not altogether be inappropriate in the present state of research. Gibson's discoveries must speak for themselves in the long term.

Studies on John the Baptist that use social description and give prominence to the 'historical' dimension have been given a big boost by the publication of R.L. Webb's *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*. Webb is concerned to understand John's two definitive roles as a baptizer and a prophet "within the social, cultural and historical context of late Second Temple Judaism".<sup>339</sup> Thus, according to Webb, an engagement with the social, cultural and historical contexts is essential if John and his ministry are to be understood. Webb notes that there is a need for

an increased sensitivity to the social setting of persons and groups within Palestine. A growing realization of the social and religious complexity of Judaism contributes to this sensitivity, as does a greater appreciation of the contributions which may be made by related disciplines such as sociology and cultural anthropology.<sup>340</sup>

Webb's socio-historical approach enables him to make greater use of extra-canonical material on John the Baptist, specifically Josephus' description of John in his *Antiquities* and the socio-political milieu within which Josephus thus describes him. Webb has identified key passages relating to John the Baptist in the Gospels and sought to illuminate them in a "realistic analysis" of Second Temple Judaism. The conclusion of "major and overarching significance" that Webb arrives at concerning John the Baptist is:

John's ministry produced a Jewish sectarian movement. Arising out of the analysis of John both as a baptizer and as a prophet, this conclusion has, in turn, illuminated our appreciation of John in those roles. Furthermore, it places John's ministry more concretely within its social, cultural and historical context.<sup>341</sup>

In general terms, therefore, Webb succeeds in concretely locating John the Baptist "within the historical tensions being experienced in first century Palestine", tensions that revealed themselves in social, religious, and political terms of reference.

<sup>338</sup> See BAR 30 (2004), 18-19.

<sup>339</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio Historical Study*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, 26.

<sup>340</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 20-21.

<sup>341</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 381.

Another study that approaches John the Baptist from the socio-historical context of his time is that by J.E. Taylor. As Taylor explains, the purpose of her study is

to provide a concise and accessible argument that redefines John as a Jewish immerser and teacher of righteousness who was accepted by many Jews as an exceptionally good and faithful man and regarded by some – including Jesus – as a prophet.<sup>342</sup>

Basically, Taylor sets out to “provide John with a context, so that he may become a less isolated figure.”<sup>343</sup> She bemoans the fact that most material on John overlooks the fact that he had a social context, and as long as this remains so our access to the essential John will be hindered, and his “isolation” will only deepen. In order, therefore, to appreciate John and his ministry it is necessary to have recourse to his world, namely the world of Second Temple Judaism. Taylor concludes her study on John thus:

John was very much a Jew of his time who aimed to live a life of total obedience to God and who sought to retrieve other Jews from lives that were far less obedient. John was an extraordinary figure, and much admired. But he is to be understood within the context of Second Temple Judaism, not formative Christianity. He was not a proto-Christian.<sup>344</sup>

Of particular interest to the social description approach that also has relevance for the history of religions approaches to John the Baptist is the recent ethno-religious study by E. Lupieri on Mandaeanism,<sup>345</sup> in which Lupieri examines the contours of John’s significance to this movement. According to Lupieri, while it is taken as a given that there was some point of connection between John the Baptist and the Mandaeans –

<sup>342</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, 8.

<sup>343</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 12.

<sup>344</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 317.

<sup>345</sup> According to B. Witherington, the Mandaeans “claim to have kept [John’s] movement going continuously into the modern era.” See B. Witherington, “John the Baptist” in J.B. Green, S. McKnight, I.H. Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 389. See also K. Rudolph, “Mandaism” in *ABD* 4 (1992), 500-502. Likewise, W. Barnstone and M. Meyer have established that, “John the Baptizer [is] the gnostic hero of the Mandaeans, Jesus of the Christian Gnostics...The Mandaeans interpret the opening chapters of Genesis in a typically gnostic manner, but they reserve a special place for John the baptizer, whose style of Jewish baptismal piety they considered to reflect the origin of their communities.” See W. Barnstone & M. Meyer (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom From the Ancient and Medieval Worlds – Pagan, Jewish, Christian, Mandaean, Manichaean, Islamic, and Cathar*, Boston & London, 2006, 4, 7.

pockets of whom are still to be found in Iran and Iraq,<sup>346</sup> as well as in western Europe,<sup>347</sup> North America,<sup>348</sup> and Australia<sup>349</sup> – the precise nature of this relationship does not appear to have been satisfactorily and conclusively established, except that John the Baptist featured prominently in the religious rituals, writings,<sup>350</sup> and ancestral history of the Mandaeans. Lupieri observes how in some historical writings of the Seventeenth Century the authors were “able to correctly identify John the Baptist as the Mandaeans’ eponym”.<sup>351</sup> It is especially in religious ritual that John the Baptist assumes his real prominence in Mandaeanism. Thus, for example, John is venerated above all.<sup>352</sup> Lupieri notes of the rituals of the group of Mandaeans he observed how “many names are pronounced, including that of John the Baptist, but not that of Jesus”.<sup>353</sup>

Lupieri’s study on John the Baptist is, as we have noted, from an ethno-religious perspective which is also rightly from the perspective of the history of religions. Indeed, Lupieri’s monograph is appropriately published in the “Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and Society” series. Lupieri has sought to study John the Baptist’s influence on a religious and sociological phenomenon that traces its origins from John the Baptist to the present day.

It is, however, important to note the voices of those who caution against a too close association of John the Baptist and the Mandaeans. C. Scobie, for example, believes that the association of the Mandaeans with John the Baptist is a “most misleading

<sup>346</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, ix-xii. Lupieri’s book has been acclaimed in the reviews (back flap) as making “an important contribution to the study of a religion...among the most ancient of the world’s living religions...whose modern adherents are largely unknown...” Concerning the recent history and present-day location of the Mandaeans see also W. Barnstone & M. Meyer (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible*, 2-7. See especially on pages 534-535.

<sup>347</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, ix-xii. See also N. Deutsch, “Mandaean Literature” in W. Barnstone & M. Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible*, 535.

<sup>348</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, xiii, xv. See also N. Deutsch, “Mandaean Literature” in W. Barnstone & M. Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible*, 535.

<sup>349</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, xv. See also N. Deutsch, “Mandaean Literature” in W. Barnstone & M. Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible*, 535.

<sup>350</sup> See, for example, E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 153-154, and especially 224-239.

<sup>351</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 75. See also on page 52.

<sup>352</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 65, 66.

<sup>353</sup> E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, xiii. But then it must be noted that the Mandaeans considered Jesus to be the “False Messiah” of the Mandaean writing, the *Ginza* (E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 240-253), while John the Baptist was taken to be the “True Mandaean” (E. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 224-239).

designation...as they are in fact strongly anti-Jewish and anti-Christian".<sup>354</sup> He does, however, make some interesting albeit contradictory observations about how the "redemption myth" – itself of Iranian origin – entered Christianity via John the Baptist who was a "pre-Mandaean" who took over the redemption myth and incorporated it into his theology.<sup>355</sup> A number of scholars have noted that some Mandaean literature has preserved some independent traditions concerning John, specifically in the *Ginza* and in the *Book of John*. In the former, Jesus is presented as one who, under false pretences at humility, received John's baptism, but proceeded to corrupt the sayings of John, pervert the baptism of the Jordan, distort the truth, and preach fraud and malice throughout the world.<sup>356</sup>

Scobie's doubts regarding the alleged connection between the Mandaeans and John the Baptist are expressed thus:

The Mandaean interest in and exaltation of John took place only at a comparatively late date...Mandaism is of no value in providing source material for the life and teaching of John the Baptist.<sup>357</sup>

Or, in the words of J. Thomas, against C.H. Kraeling:<sup>358</sup>

Jean a donc été introduit dans le mandéisme de façon adventice et tardive; c'est là, nous semble-t-il, un fait indéniable et qui réduit à néant toutes les théories pan-mandéennes de Reitzenstein et autres. Si, en effet, la figure de Jean n'est pas primitive dans le mandéisme, il est clair qu'on ne peut prouver le moindre lien de parenté entre les Mandéens et Jean ou les Johannites.<sup>359</sup>

Scobie concludes the matter thus:

The conclusion is inescapable that Mandaean literature cannot provide us with any pre-Christian material which could have entered the early Church via John the Baptist or with any genuine traditions concerning the life and ministry of John,<sup>360</sup>

which is echoed by J. Thomas:

<sup>354</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 23.

<sup>355</sup> C. Scobie, *Jon the Baptist*, 24-25.

<sup>356</sup> See the *Ginza* II, 1, 151-152.

<sup>357</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 31.

<sup>358</sup> C.H. Kraeling, "The Origin and Antiquity of the Mandaeans", *JAOS* 49 (1929), 216.

<sup>359</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 260.

<sup>360</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 30.



Les Mandéens n'ont donc rien à voir avec Jean-Baptiste, qui n'est, pour reprendre les mots de Goguel, "que le héros éponyme d'une pratique baptismale qui n'aurait guère d'éléments communs avec la pratique baptismale du prophète du Jourdain".<sup>361</sup>

While it is clear that the last word has not yet been spoken regarding the relationship (in whatever form or to whichever degree) between John the Baptist (and/or his followers) and the Mandaeans, the weight of evidence must, in the current state of research, rest with the most recent studies of Lupieri, Witherington, Rudolph and others. They do not in any way appear to suggest that the Mandaeans were founded by John the Baptist. They have, however, not altogether closed the door to the *possibility* that the movement of the Mandaeans (perhaps in Palestine) was in some way informed, and possibly influenced by the teaching of John the Baptist<sup>362</sup> - a teaching which they integrated into their own theology. Scholars are not agreed as to the extent of this influence.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 *An Ongoing Dialogue*

In the preceding sections an attempt has been made at presenting a brief survey of the *status quaestionis* in research on Luke-Acts in general and on John the Baptist in particular in the period from the 1950's to the present. We have raised and looked at the question whether it is just to fetter the vast scope of Lucan writings to one too finely defined methodological strait-jacket. Indeed, we have noted in the preceding pages some rather strong views of scholars (e.g. Dupont, Gasque) who maintain that, given the rich diversity of Luke's writings, it would not do to place them under restrictive categories that may not do sufficient justice to the purpose and intention of the author in relation to his audience.

As was noted earlier, one of the greatest areas of conflict in Lucan research is seen in the attempt to answer the question: What was the purpose of Luke-Acts? And how was that purpose mediated and transmitted, and to whom? These and similar elements have constituted the most divisive areas in Lucan research, and scholarly consensus on these aspects has at times gone from the remote to the impossible.

<sup>361</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 263.

<sup>362</sup> E. Lupieri has, in fact, not only not left the door to this possibility open. He states it as a matter of fact.

However, our brief survey of some of the literature and scholarly perspectives since the 1950's has shown that there may yet be light at the end of the tunnel. Many are the scholars disaffected with the failure of the traditional critical methods at reaching some consensus on at least the key points of Luke-Acts, therefore the clamour for a methodological shift has been loud and clear, especially in the last two decades. It is also true that some scholars (e.g. Conzelmann) perhaps unintentionally precipitated a crisis in Lucan studies that galvanized scholars into a critical review of their respective methodologies and perspectives. In this way, new life was injected into Lucan research as scholars responded to Conzelmann.

However, response to Conzelmann was not enough. Scholars asked: Surely there must be much more to Lucan research that goes beyond Conzelmann? And surely Lucan research is not merely a question of proving geographic provenance or historical reliability, or even theological *Tendenz*?

### 5.2 *The Quest for Consensus*

Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge the obvious. It is to the abiding credit of Lucan scholarship that Luke and Acts have been recognized and accepted as the product of one author. This has been, at least, one area of almost unanimous scholarly consensus in a field in which unanimity is hard to come by.<sup>363</sup>

Secondly, scholarship has not been paralyzed by the difficulties posed by the various critical approaches to Luke-Acts, but has risen to the challenge to seek not only a consensus but a combination of critical tools so that Luke-Acts could be better appreciated. There has been a continuous and determined evaluation and re-thinking of methodologies and approaches which has led to shifts in points of emphasis and a lively if at times polemical debate on the various aspects of Luke's writings.

In the preceding sections we have attempted to trace the trajectories followed by Lucan research in the last few decades, as well as to follow as attentively as possible the shifts in methodological emphasis. In addition, we attempted to associate the

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<sup>363</sup> See, however, M.C. Parsons and R. Pervo's *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*.

names of some of the most prominent Lucan scholars with some of the most influential shifts in perspective over the last decades.

Our attempt to follow the 'shifting sands' of Lucan studies has basically led us to four distinctive phases in Lucan studies. There was, to begin with, the period when the historical value of Luke-Acts was in the ascendance (Bruce, Marshall). This was followed by a shift precipitated by Conzelmann's extreme scepticism regarding the historical value of Luke-Acts that led to an emphasis on the theological value of Luke's writings, a position that, on the balance of evidence, commanded greater scholarly support.

In the characteristic dissatisfaction with the methods used in Lucan studies, even this last approach was still considered not enough and too polemical, involving as it did two positions that were not always inclusive or tolerant of the other's point of view. An attempt was thus made by scholars from both camps (Fitzmyer, Lüdemann, Hemer, Hengel) to appreciate the opposing view and, if possible, arrive at some common ground. This was achieved, to a certain extent. Some scholars abandoned their previously dogmatic stance and began to view Luke-Acts as a historical theology or a theology of history.

But still some scholars were not quite at ease with what some others considered an unsatisfactory combination of history, theology, and literary theory. Another effort was seen to be in order. It was this fresh quest that led to the adoption of the social scientific approach to Lucan studies (Neyrey, Malina, Gager, Cassidy, Esler, and Moxnes among others). Because of its openness to the principles of literary theory, media, and social description, the new research on Luke-Acts looks set to ride the tide of post-modernism. While the literary approach has broadened the Lucan writings from the purely historical or theological sphere to the much wider context of secular literature and media, the social-scientific approach helps in putting the reader in touch with the social and everyday milieux of the ancient Mediterranean peoples to whom and for whom the New Testament texts were originally written. It may well be that in this post-modern age, when theology in general and the Bible in particular are becoming somewhat irrelevant an approach that is multi-disciplinary (theology, history, literature and the social sciences) may provide the hermeneutical tools

necessary for a credible access to the New Testament in general, and to Luke-Acts' John the Baptist in particular.

The close affinity between history and social sciences has long been acknowledged, even though some scholars have experienced working with the two disciplines as a "dialogue of the deaf".<sup>364</sup> John Elliott describes social-scientific criticism as a sub-discipline of historical criticism or an expansion, and perhaps even a completion of historical criticism.<sup>365</sup>

Esler maintains that his interest in using the social-sciences methodology lies in a basic historical question, namely what the texts meant for their original audiences. For him, in dealing with the past the social-sciences must of necessity collaborate with history since

given its emphasis on the novel, the unique and the particular, history (at least to the extent it does not employ social-scientific perspectives) cannot hope to supply all the questions which must be put to the New Testament if we are to penetrate the ordinary and everyday – but nevertheless fundamentally important – interrelationships, values and symbols which characterised the early Christian communities and which are reflected in the twenty-seven canonical texts which were written for them and to them.<sup>366</sup>

Michael Lafargue argues that theology cannot be separated from the social sciences because theology is a part of culture and, as an aspect of culture,

the meaning of theological ideas is determined contextually. Theological ideas get their meaning from the relation in which they stand to other elements of the cultural milieu of which they are a part.<sup>367</sup>

<sup>364</sup> See, for example, R. Rohrbaugh's perception that "Though the two disciplines [history and the social sciences] are obviously complementary, dialogue between them has often been what Burke calls a "dialogue of the deaf"" (*The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, 8).

<sup>365</sup> See the explanation of his methodology in J. Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*

<sup>366</sup> P.F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds*, 2. In the ongoing debate regarding the interaction between critical biblical studies that make use of history, theology, the literary sciences, and the social-sciences, Vernon Robbins has outlined a useful way forward for a continued fruitful co-operation of these methodologies in biblical interpretation. See his "Social-Scientific Criticism and Literary Studies: Prospects for a cooperation in biblical interpretation" in P.F. Esler (ed.), *Modelling Early Christianity*, 274-289.

<sup>367</sup> M. Lafargue, "Sociohistorical Research and the Contextualization of Biblical Theology", in J. Neusner et al. (eds.), *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988, 5.

Esler summarizes the issues involved in the interaction between history, theology, and the social-scientific approach by noting that

the New Testament writings manifest a complex interpenetration of society and Gospel, of context and *kerygma* ('the proclamation of faith'), and that we cannot hope to understand either without an appropriate methodology for dealing with the social side. The disciplines I have in mind for this task are the social sciences. Sociology is perhaps the most useful, but anthropology and social psychology also have contributions to make. I am not suggesting that these disciplines should replace the literary and historical techniques which have long been employed by New Testament critics. The social sciences are best seen as a necessary adjunct to established forms of criticism.<sup>368</sup>

Further on he notes:

If we are to interpret the documents written in this situation, where society was fused with Gospel, and context with *kerygma*, the social sciences offer us resources which cannot wisely be ignored. The question is not 'Do we need the social sciences?' but rather 'How can we get along without them?'<sup>369</sup>

Esler further points out that explorations into sectarianism (as a social phenomenon, and as outlined by Bryan Wilson<sup>370</sup>) and the formation of new religious movements formed the basis of his work on Luke-Acts.

We have already noted H.C. Waetjen's conviction that there has to be an intrinsic connection between sociology, cultural anthropology and literary criticism if "misconstruction and misinterpretation" are to be avoided.<sup>371</sup>

Our overall analysis and appraisal of the the foregoing literary survey of the *status quaestionis* in Lucan studies indicates that a reading of Luke-Acts that combines social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to understand the role of key protagonists in Luke-Acts in general, or of John the Baptist in particular has never yet been attempted, hence the importance and relevance of still another study. Clearly the traditional approaches to Luke-Acts have not succeeded in extricating John the Baptist from the Jesus-of-Nazareth web. If the rehabilitation of John the Baptist is to succeed, the challenge is on scholarship to be methodologically as diverse and as

<sup>368</sup> P.F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds*, 2.

<sup>369</sup> P.F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds*, 18.

<sup>370</sup> See B. Wilson's *Religious Sects*.

<sup>371</sup> H.C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, x-xi.



creative as possible as some of the answers to today's critical questions might come from the least expected directions.

John the Baptist is portrayed in Luke-Acts in ways that presuppose a specific though multi-dimensional context into which John is inculturated. And so it is that in the next section, enriched by the fruits of past scholarship and guided by our own combination of social description and narrative-theological analysis, we turn to the world that shaped and formed the John the Baptist that the author of Luke-Acts wanted his readers to encounter and to relate to.

## PART TWO

### THE WORLD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

#### 6. THE BACKGROUND OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

##### 6.1 Introduction

The aim of the present study is to understand how the author of Luke-Acts portrays John the Baptist in a way that seeks to move his audience to emulate him in living out their Christian calling, as well as in carrying out their mandate to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth as authentic prophets and witnesses. John, however, is to be understood in the world and in which Luke has located him, namely the Jewish world of the late Second Temple to the early First Century C.E. What follows is an attempt to recreate the social, contextual, and religious contexts within which John is presented as having lived and exercised his ministry as prophet, baptizer, and witness. This is not intended to be an investigation of the historical John the Baptist (a futile exercise in any case, in our judgment), but rather, through a combination of social description and narrative-theological analysis of Luke-Acts, to have hermeneutical access to John the Baptist as the author of Luke-Acts would like his readers to understand him. Granted, some information of a somewhat historical nature (for example some insights drawn from Flavius Josephus, or the later social description of Emil Schürer and others) will not altogether be excluded in the contextual location of the Lucan John the Baptist that is being attempted here.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the social sciences and, in particular, social description to biblical interpretation has been their convincing articulation of both the spatial and temporal divide between the ancient writers and their audiences and the modern reader who today is the inheritor of the ancient writings. Social description has helped us to appreciate both the fact as well as the implications of what Rohrbaugh has referred to as the "social distance" between the modern reader and the ancient text.<sup>372</sup> Not that Rohrbaugh was the first scholar to arrive at this realization. Indeed, we have noted earlier a number of the pioneering scholars in the social-scientific approach to the scriptures and those who have attempted a social description and reconstruction of the biblical world. Coming as he did on the wave of a growing

<sup>372</sup> R. Rohrbaugh (ed.), *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, 7.

interest in the social world of the New Testament, especially in Germany,<sup>373</sup> O. Cullman, for example, already pointed out as early as 1925 the need for a "special branch of sociology" for biblical studies.<sup>374</sup> In concrete terms, however, Cullman's call went unheeded for the better part of a quarter of a century until R.W. Smith took the first steps with the publication in 1956 of his seminal work *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*. Since then, there has been a marked increase in the number of scholars<sup>375</sup> who have, from varying perspectives, developed social-scientific and social description methodological approaches that have greatly enhanced our ability to bridge the "social distance" between ourselves and the world reflected in the ancient writings, especially the worlds of both the Old Testament and the New.

The phenomenal rise in the popularity of the social-scientific approaches as well as of social description among scholars goes beyond mere dissatisfaction with the predominant historical-critical method. It is the result, rather, of an acknowledgment that the biblical texts reflect the faith of simple men and women in their everyday milieu. As G. Theissen has correctly noted, "The situation, the *Sitz im Leben*, from which the Bible springs is the life of the people".<sup>376</sup> There is a need for us to understand that life if the biblical texts are to fully come alive in the hands of modern readers. There is a need, as it were, to read the bible from below. Social history has proved to be indispensable to exegesis, for in order to understand the message of the scriptures it is necessary to

pay more attention than has become customary to the ordinary pattern of life in the immediate environment within which the Christian movement was born. It will not do to describe that environment in terms of vague generalities...[T]o the limit that the sources and our abilities permit, we must try to discern the texture of life in particular times and particular places.<sup>377</sup>

<sup>373</sup> D.G. Horrell has summarized well the emergence and development of the "social questions" relating to the New Testament, beginning with Hermann Gunkel's development of form criticism which attempted to relate the text to its *Sitz im Leben*. See D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social-Scientific Approaches*, 4-19, especially pages 4-6. See also G. Theissen's description of the checkered history of social-scientific biblical criticism in *The Social Reality and the Early Christians*, 3-21.

<sup>374</sup> Cited from P.F. Esler, "The Socio-Redaction Criticism of Luke-Acts", in D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social-Scientific Approaches*, , 128.

<sup>375</sup> See D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social Scientific Approaches*, 7-26, for a listing.

<sup>376</sup> G. Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, 4.

<sup>377</sup> W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 2.

The recent surge in what Cullmann termed a "special branch of sociology for biblical studies" is perhaps also an indictment of the neglect of the sociological point of view due to an overemphasis on the literary-historical and theological perspective.

Obviously it is not meant by this statement that theological perspectives are *a priori* inappropriate to the study of early Christianity. It is however advisable to take seriously the cautionary approach of J.G. Gager when he asserts that

the inadequacy of theological paradigms is [...] that they have been directly responsible for the neglect of sociological and anthropological points of view.<sup>378</sup>

Most, if not all critical approaches to scripture in fact presuppose this principle without always explicitly enunciating it in as many words. When, for example, Hermann Gunkel developed the method of form criticism, he aimed at recovering the earliest forms of textual traditions by relating their use to their particular setting in life, or their use in particular cultural and social settings.

This is not, however, to say that there were areas in which the social sciences and social description did not decisively part ways with other approaches to biblical criticism. For example, the reader-response criticism which seeks in its methodology to determine meaning directly from the text itself without reference to the social context worked from a principle diametrically opposed to the one at the heart of the social-scientific method. B. Malina has noted that

the effort [by the school of the reader-response criticism] to read the Bible as literature, for its aesthetic majesty and universal ideas, involves an attempt at decontextualization since any aesthetic-literary, ahistorical framework is decontextualized. Much of the reader-response approach to literature is equally decontextualized, totally dismissing the social dimensions of author, original audience and the text in question.<sup>379</sup>

In brief, then, the greatest contribution of social description and the social sciences to biblical exegesis has been the recognition that the authentic meaning and terms of

<sup>378</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 3. See also R.A. Atkins, who says: "The traditional focus on ideas and theological constructs in biblical research leaves out the motivating role that sustaining and changing multiple social hierarchies have on defining ideology", *Egalitarian Community*, 31.

<sup>379</sup> B. Malina, "Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke-Acts", in J.H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 21. The social-scientific method, according to Malina, is all about "contextualized literacy".

reference of the biblical (and indeed any) text are to be found embedded in the crucible of culture, time, and space. Contact with these formative and decisive influences helps the reader to add human faces to the bare text. Social description is thus helpful for interpreting meaning communicated through texts within a social context, as long as it is kept in mind that interpreting a text is not the same as interpreting culture.

In other words, the text comes alive and takes upon itself a distinct form and character when read from the background of the world within and about which it speaks. The social-scientific approach involves a movement from the abstraction and disembodiment of the de-contextualized or de-historicized text to concrete personal involvement,<sup>380</sup> whether that involvement be that of the author, or the original audience, or the present day reader. Or, in the words of Gager: "once we begin to pay serious attention to the social constituency of [early Christianity], the customary overemphasis on theological matters seems quite out of place."<sup>381</sup>

But is this – or should this – necessarily be the case? Are theological and historical loyalties always in conflict, or is there neutral ground over which they not only meet but also cross-pollinate? We share the more nuanced approach with R. Ulin in his assertion that

Both the textual scholar and the anthropologist are confronted with the difficult task of appropriating that which is alien or not one's own...the process that characterizes the comprehension of human actions and cultural products is not essentially different from the interpretation of a text as a life expression<sup>382</sup>

or, in the thought of Ernst Käsemann: the primary force for the development of the early church was *the cross between theology and experience*.<sup>383</sup>

<sup>380</sup> See R.A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus", *CBQ* 46 (1984), 472-473.

<sup>381</sup> J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 5.

<sup>382</sup> R. Ulin, *Understanding Culture: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory*, 92. See also R.A. Atkins, *Egalitarian Community*, 39-40.

<sup>383</sup> See "Paul and Early Catholicism" in E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 236-251.



## 6.2 *The Context of John the Baptist*

The "Fertile Crescent" is undoubtedly the single most studied area of the world. What it lacks in geographical size it makes up for in scientific and scholarly attention and research. Long (though not altogether accurately) acclaimed as "the cradle of civilization", what the historians call the "Ancient Near East", or what we now commonly call the Middle East, has for centuries fascinated the anthropologist, archaeologist, historian, biblicist, philologist, politician, social-scientist, and many other specialists from diverse fields of learning. Many eminent and scholarly works that have greatly enhanced our knowledge of this small part of the world have been written in our own times. However, for the purposes of our study we are offering a very limited and narrowly focused look at Palestine in the brief but eventful times of John the Baptist.

Most recent studies in the area have been concerned to show how widespread and influential the apocalyptic, messianic and liberation movements in Palestine were during the First Century C.E.<sup>384</sup> Many movements emerged within Judaism that to a greater or lesser extent left their mark on the society and culture of their day. John the Baptist and his movement flourished during this highly charged period in Palestinian history.

If we accept in general terms Luke's narrative technique – according to which he seeks to establish historical parallels and synchronisms between the events about

<sup>384</sup> A sampling of the works dealing with the subject of apocalypticism, messianism, revolutionary and other movements includes, among others, W. Beuken, S. Freyne, A. Weiler (eds.), *Messianism Through History*; G. Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought 300 B.C.D. to 200 C.E.*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, see especially Part I; D. Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah*, London, T&T Clark, 1997, see especially chapters 1-3, 10; W. Fairweather, *The Background of the Gospels: Judaism in the Period Between the Old and New Testaments*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1920; L.H. Feldman & M. Reinhold (eds.), *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, see especially sections 8-10; L.L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1992; L.L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to First Century Judaism: Jewish Religion and History in the Second Temple Period*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1974; W. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*, London, T&T Clark, 1998; W. Horbury, *Messianism Among Jews and Christians*, London, T&T Clark, 2003; R.A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus", *CBQ* 46 (1984), 471-495; R.A. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets of Old: Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus", *CBQ* 47 (1985), 435-463; R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*; S. Jones & S. Pearce (eds.), *Jewish Local Patriotism and Self-Identification in the Graeco-Roman Period*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press; E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1992.

which he writes and objective data from Roman history,<sup>385</sup> – it is possible to situate John the Baptist with a high degree of certainty in the first half of the First Century C.E.

### 6.2.1 *Turmoil and Revolt*

Palestine was at this time a part of the Roman Empire, and if we follow Flavius Josephus' analysis of the period,<sup>386</sup> Palestine was a particularly trouble-prone part of the empire, if not in fact the most volatile little corner of the Roman Empire. R.A. Horsley has neatly summarized the "salient characteristics of this period [in Palestine as] turmoil and revolt".<sup>387</sup>

While the Jews, on the socio-political and cultural level, had been largely assimilated into the Greco-Roman environment of which they were unavoidably a part, they could be quite uncompromising on matters that touched upon their religion, for this was what set them apart and gave them a distinct national identity in the cultural melting pot that was the Roman Empire. Relations with Gentiles were accepted as necessary and unavoidable in day-to-day economic, civic, and even political matters, but only to a certain degree. The *Book of Jubilees* gives an example of the stipulated boundaries of social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles:

Separate yourself from the Gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable...And for all of those who worship idols and for the hated ones, there is no hope in the land of the living; because they will go down into sheol. And in the place of judgment they will walk, and they will have no memory upon the earth". (*Jubilees* 22:16, 22)

The teaching against Jew-Gentile marriages was even harsher:

If there be any man in Israel who wishes to give his daughter or his sister to any man who is from the seed of the gentiles, let him surely die, and let him be stoned because he has caused shame in Israel. And also the woman will be burned with fire because she has defiled the name of her father's house and so she will be uprooted from Israel...And there is no limit of days for this law. And there is no remission or forgiveness..." (*Jubilees* 30:7-17)

<sup>385</sup> See, for example, the references to "Herod, king of Judea" (Luke 1:5; 3:18-20; 23:6-15; cf. Acts 12:1-13:1); Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1); "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2); Tiberius (Luke 3:1-3); Pilate (Luke 23:1-25); "Felix the governor" (Acts 23:24-26; "when two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus" (Acts 24:27)

<sup>386</sup> *War* i.1.4.

<sup>387</sup> R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*, xxxiii.

Purity thus served to underline Judaism's separation from the rest of the world, and to establish a particular and distinct identity for the Jewish people.

Similar attitudes on the political level spawned a number of revolutionary movements in Palestine, such as the Sicarii<sup>388</sup> and the Zealots – though R.A. Horsley has shot down the idea that there ever was a movement by this name “prior to the second year of the great Jewish-Revolt of 66-70”.<sup>389</sup> According to Horsley, therefore, the group of people called ‘the Zealots’ are “a modern scholarly construct”. Various revolutionary and popular prophetic and messianic pretenders also attracted to themselves large numbers of people who thought that they might in some way (sometimes understood in terms of some form of military action) rid themselves of foreign domination and thereby bring about a reconstitution of Jewish nationhood under the rule of Yahweh through a messianic figure appointed by him. Josephus, in one of his sweeping generalizations describes the leaders of these movements as

impostors and deceivers who called upon the mob to follow them into the desert; for they said that they would show them unmistakable marvels and signs that would be wrought in harmony with God's design.<sup>390</sup>

Nor were these movements only politically motivated. A number were fuelled by experiences of being socially and/or economically deprived. These movements were, to use E.W. and W. Stegemann's phrase, “stratum-related” on account of the “embedding of religion in socio-economic antagonisms”.<sup>391</sup>

The specific issue of Jewish national identity became the battle cry of some of these movements. The motivation was clear:

because of the virtually permanent foreign hegemony with its pagan or semipagan governing structures, the urgency of an identity-preserving delineation was not exactly small...it is not by accident that discussions about purity and food regulations in the New Testament and above all in the Mishnah have important significance; in many respects they are crucial for Pharisees and Essenes...they also shaped the daily

<sup>388</sup> *War* ii.13.3. See also *Ant.* xx.8; *War* vii.8; E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 138, 165-167.

<sup>389</sup> R.A. Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus”, *CBQ* 46 (1984), 471-472.

<sup>390</sup> *Ant.* xx.8. See also *War* xi.13.

<sup>391</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 138. See also page 186.

life of most Judeans, as attested especially by Josephus (cf. *Ap.* 1.198, 205; but cf. also Luke 2:22-23, 39).<sup>392</sup>

The period during which John the Baptist lived – one of the most heavily studied historical periods of Judaism<sup>393</sup> – has been described as “one of the most violent epochs of Jewish history...a milieu ripe for revolution”.<sup>394</sup> Reasons for this volatile situation have been cited, among others, as “foreign military occupation, class conflicts, misconduct of Jewish and Roman officials, Hellenism, burdensome taxation”.<sup>395</sup>

The search for political and religio-cultural self-determination in the pluralistic and culturally diverse world of the Greco-Roman Empire<sup>396</sup> was one of the key characteristics that defined Jewish identity, more so in Palestine than in the Diaspora. Going back to times well before the Maccabean revolt – about which see the rather full description in 1 and 2 Maccabees – the stage was already set for one of history’s longest struggles for national independence and cultural self-determination. The attempts at forceful Hellenization of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (1 Maccabees 1-6; 2 Maccabees 4-10) became both a catalyst and a point of departure for one of the most sustained if futile attempts at rebellion by what was in essence one of the smallest regions of the Roman Empire pitting itself against the awesome military might of Rome.

<sup>392</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999, 143.

<sup>393</sup> See, among many other studies of the period, E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*; L.L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*; L.L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to First Century Judaism*; L.H. Feldman & M. Reinhold (eds.), *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans*; E.P. Sanders, *Judaism*; B.J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*, London, Routledge, 1996; S. Jones & S. Pearce, *Jewish Local Patriotism and Self-Identification in the Graeco-Roman Period*; R.A. Horsley & J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*.

<sup>394</sup> W.J. Heard & C.A. Evans, “Jewish Revolutionary Movements” in C.A. Evans & S.E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2000, 936.

<sup>395</sup> W.J. Heard & C.A. Evans, “Jewish Revolutionary Movements”, 936.

<sup>396</sup> E.W. Stegemann and W. Stegemann trace Jewish difficulties in adjusting to the pluralism of the Greco-Roman world to, among other factors, the reason that “Judaism in the period of the second temple was always shaped by a number of fixed characteristics and institutions, whose roots reached far back into the preexilic period and its traditions”. See *The Jesus Movement*, 137, also 142). The Stegemanns speak later on of the “urgency of an identity-preserving delineation” by which the Jewish people could draw “boundaries between [the] outside and [the] inside” (: 142). By these and other means the Jews were able to preserve themselves as a religious and cultural entity in a world that they perceived as hostile to them.

Down through the centuries the legacy of foreign occupation and especially the imposition of Roman rule as well as of local leaders<sup>397</sup> generated a widespread spirit of resistance among the Palestinian Jews. Roman response to movements perceived as insurrectionist was sometimes quite harsh and repressive. Great numbers of leaders and followers of these movements were either slaughtered or crucified by the troops of procurators such as Pilate, Fadus, and Felix.<sup>398</sup> In spite of this various charismatic movements with political as well as religious agendas for the liberation of the nation from external rule sprang up throughout Palestine. Social-revolutionary resistance and rebellious movements as well as what E.W. and W. Stegemann call "charismatic-ascetic messianic-prophetic groups"<sup>399</sup> were common phenomena in the world of John the Baptist.<sup>400</sup> Indeed, John the Baptist and his followers are to be counted among the movements of the time. As noted by E.W. and W. Stegemann

these movements...represent in each case a specific and original answer to the crisis of Jewish society...there are religious reactions to the destruction of Jewish society through the coercions of pagan and semipagan structures of sovereignty, reactions that were only of a more or less indirect or prepolitical kind.<sup>401</sup>

A great section of these movements eschewed strong messianic<sup>402</sup> and apocalyptic-eschatological ideas – though Horsley notes that

there is very little evidence [as usually suggested by secondary literature] for any Jewish expectation for an eschatological prophet prior to the early Christian communities' interpretation of Jesus (and John the Baptist) and the emergence of rabbinic Judaism following the crisis created by the Roman devastation of Jewish Palestine in A.D. 70.<sup>403</sup>

Biblical and other literature of the time reflects an intense belief in a decisive action of God for the liberation of his people. This was understood not only to involve

<sup>397</sup> The period of the rule of Herod the Great, though glorious by Hellenistic-Roman standards (extensive building projects, lavish donations to imperial figures and Hellenistic cities), has been noted to be one of the most oppressive for the average Jewish people – economically and politically. See further R.A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus", 480. See also Horsley's assessment (in "Ancient Jewish Banditry") of the internal, intra-Jewish hostilities that made the situation in Palestine ripe for revolt, "even without the factor of foreign rule." (:416-417).

<sup>398</sup> *Ant.* xviii.4; xx.5; xx.8; *War* ii.13.

<sup>399</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 138.

<sup>400</sup> See also R.A. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets of Old", 461-463.

<sup>401</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 138-139.

<sup>402</sup> Messianic movements in Israel are traced by R.A. Horsley as far back as the time of Saul and David. These movements continued to use especially the latter as their battle cry or point of ideological reference. See Horsley's argument in "Popular Messianic Movements", 474-478.

<sup>403</sup> R.A. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets of Old", 437.



political and social deliverance and restoration, but a thoroughgoing religious renewal as well. It was this enduring belief that sustained the nation during periods of foreign domination, suffering and persecution, confident that it would eventually be liberated from earthly and spiritual travail. The people longed for a messianic deliverer of the house and ilk of David. The messiah would inaugurate a period of well-being, at the end of which there would be judgment on the basis of which the wicked would be destroyed and the faithful saved.

### 6.2.2 *Miracle Workers and Liberators*

The long history of this messianic expectation spawned a succession of charismatic and/or prophetic leaders,<sup>404</sup> as well as messianic pretenders; people who either claimed to be the long-awaited messiah, or who were acclaimed as such by groups of people they collected around themselves. Some presented themselves as the political liberators for whom the nation had long waited, and they formed movements with the political deliverance of the nation as their main end in view, while others claimed special affinity to one or other of the great prophets and leaders of old, notably Elijah and Moses. This linking with the great figures of the past like Moses, Joshua, David, and Elijah was how some of the movements fed their religious motivations. E.W. and W. Stegemann give the Zealots<sup>405</sup> and the movement of John the Baptist as examples of this trend.<sup>406</sup> Among the charismatic leaders of some movements were also magic healers, miracle workers, leaders who could read the signs of the times, or people like Honi<sup>407</sup> who was believed to have successfully prayed for rain, which recalls the miracle of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1.

Traditions of these movements and their leaders, whether genuine or pretentious, are also found in the New Testament. References to "sign prophets" are seen, for example, in Mark 13:21-22; Matthew 24:23-27; Acts 5:36; 21:38. Similarly, warnings against "false prophets" can be seen, for example, in Mt. 24:4-26. Acts 5:36

<sup>404</sup> See, for example, a listing of some of these messianic/prophetic figures in E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 163-165.

<sup>405</sup> Note, however, Horsley's comment on the non existence of the Zealots during the time of John the Baptist, and their subsequent emergence about two years or so after the Jewish revolt of 66-70 against Rome.

<sup>406</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 186.

<sup>407</sup> *Antiquities* xiv.22ff. See also the Mishnah (*Taanit* 3.8). Though the context may be different, the Midrash specifically connects Honi with Elijah and proclaims: "No one is equal to Elijah or Honi the Circle-drawer" (*Ber. R.* 13.7).

refers to Theudas,<sup>408</sup> a false prophet who was slain and his movement (said to number 400) came to grief. A similar fate is reported to have befallen Judas the Galilean, yet another false prophet whose story is evoked in Acts 5:37. His followers also dispersed after their leader was killed. Still another movement, led by a person simply referred to in Acts 21:38 as “the Egyptian”<sup>409</sup> who stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness”, came to grief, as did his followers after him.

It is within this pluriformity of political and religious movements that John the Baptist and his disciples are to be located. They were part of a much wider phenomenon in Judaism, a phenomenon that included prophets, leaders of military movements, leaders of religious or cultic movements, and even leaders of bandits whose incentive was neither the political deliverance nor religious purification of the nation, but material gain through plain old-fashioned criminal activity – or “social banditry”, as Horsley refers to the phenomenon of groups engaged in non-political and/or non-religious movements. Josephus, on the other hand, uses the stronger term “brigandage” to refer to any group or movement exhibiting dissent in any form against the status quo.<sup>410</sup> In any case, Josephus’ ill-disposition towards, and impatience with any grouping with rebellious tendencies is well-known. In his opinion, these were the misguided elements that eventually forced the hand of Rome to unleash its military might against the Jewish nation. Josephus would have wanted to see all movements of this nature destroyed before the entire nation was made to suffer for what he considered the misguided and headstrong revolutionary actions of some of these groups.

<sup>408</sup> Josephus refers to this incident in *Ant.* xx.97-98.

<sup>409</sup> The “Egyptian” is mentioned by Josephus in *War* ii.262ff and *Ant.* xx.169-171. According to Josephus, the Egyptian attracted to himself 30,000 men “to follow him up the Mount of Olives, where they expected to experience the eschatological equivalent of the great historical act of God, of Joshua’s battle of Jericho ... The walls of Jerusalem would fall, the Romans would be displaced, and the true reign of God be restored” – R.A. Horsley, “Ancient Jewish Banditry”, 423. See also the following sections in Josephus: *Ant.* xx.8; *War* ii.13. Josephus also speaks, in *Ant.* xviii.85ff, of a comparable movement among the Samaritans in the time of Pontius Pilate. This movement led an armed revolt which was put down by the Romans. Generally, Josephus refers to all these “pseudo-prophets” (the likes of Theudas, “the Egyptian”, and the un-named Samaritan) as “tempters and deceivers who under the pretext of divine inspiration evoked unrest and uproar and through their words instilled demonic enthusiasm in the masses”, *War* ii.261. See also *Ant.* x.97.

<sup>410</sup> *Ant.* xvii.10.

The social bandits expressed their resistance to the given social and political order by, among other means, leading what E.W. and W. Stegemann refer to as "economically foreign lifestyles" by which they created "counterworlds".<sup>411</sup> Withdrawing to the wilderness (about which see further below) was one of the ways by which these movements or at least their leaders sought to create a "counterworld" or an alternative society.

It would, however, be quite misleading to reduce the function of the many movements in Palestine before and during the time of John the Baptist to that of political or social resistance only. C. Scobie<sup>412</sup> and J. Thomas<sup>413</sup> have both shown that in the period shortly before and during the time of John the Baptist there were many sects whose purpose was religious purification of the nation rather than social or political change. This, however, is a false dichotomy for, as we have already noted above, religion was embedded in the fabric of Jewish society. Referring specifically to the movement of John the Baptist, for example, Scobie notes that it was in fact

"one of a number of groups with similar characteristics which flourished in the same region of the Jordan valley [...] baptism was one of the most important practices which they had in common [for which reason] they have been classified together as 'the Baptist movement'".<sup>414</sup>

Scobie speaks of a "widespread and vigorous sectarian movement"<sup>415</sup> in the time of John the Baptist. As such, the movement of John and his followers (or indeed those of Jesus) would have attracted little (if any) official attention, were it not for the apparently insurrectionist and provocative tone of the message they preached. This, as we shall see, is what ultimately sealed the fate of both John and Jesus, not to mention that of many more leaders and followers of movements whose actions and 'manifestos' were interpreted by the state as seditious.

<sup>411</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 186.

<sup>412</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*.

<sup>413</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste en Palestine et Syrie*, Gembloux, J. Duculot, 1935.

<sup>414</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 33.

<sup>415</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 34. See also J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 33-60.

An important sect of the 'baptist movement' was the community of Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea.<sup>416</sup> This sect is particularly valuable for the insight it has shed on sectarian life in general, and especially on sectarian baptism and other purificatory rites.

In addition to the *Essenes* – the name by which the Qumran community is generally (though perhaps not always accurately<sup>417</sup>) known – Scobie and Thomas list other baptist movements in the era of John the Baptist, such as, for example, the Nasarenes,<sup>418</sup> the Hemerobaptists,<sup>419</sup> the Masbotheans, about whom nothing much is known, apart from the fact that they were a Jewish sect.

Within the amorphous 'baptist movement' before and during the period of John the Baptist, mention is also made of the "Morning Bathers" who washed themselves every morning.<sup>420</sup>

There were many other movements that emerged after John the Baptist that are of no direct relevance to us because of their late provenance. These are, however, amply discussed by Scobie,<sup>421</sup> Thomas,<sup>422</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer,<sup>423</sup> and others.

Such, then, were the times and general environment within which John the Baptist flourished; essentially times of socio-political and religious "turmoil and revolt," to borrow the phrase of E.W. and W. Stegemann. However, this was not just a period of "turmoil and revolt" in the political and social spheres: it was also a period of the 'wilderness', to which groups of Jews withdrew both in search of religious purity as

<sup>416</sup> About which see the extensive literature that has recently become available in keeping with the ever advancing understanding of scholars, archaeologists, scientists and anthropologists of what has fast become the most studied religious sect of the ancient world. See also Scobie's own less detailed but clear description of the movement in his *John the Baptist*, 34-48.

<sup>417</sup> See, for example, G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 11. Note Beasley-Murray's carefully nuanced approach to the subject on pages 12, 17, and 39).

<sup>418</sup> Carefully distinguished by Epiphanius from the Christian sect of the Nazorenes. See further on this point J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 37-40. The Nasarenes lived east of the Jordan, in the region of Bashan and Gilead.

<sup>419</sup> Their main characteristic, as their name suggests, appears to have been their ritual of daily washing. See further J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 34-37.

<sup>420</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 44.

<sup>421</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 36.

<sup>422</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 46-60; 156-183.

<sup>423</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Qumran Scrolls, the Ebionites and their Literature" in K. Stendahl, *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, New York, Harper, 1957, 208-231.

well as a staging ground for the re-conquest of the promised land. A number of these groups had in common the practice of some form of baptism or ritual washing, though in nearly all but a few cases we still lack much definite information.

One element that has been suggested by some scholars as having fired the imagination of some (others would say most<sup>424</sup>) sectarians is opposition to the Temple priesthood and to the Temple sacrifices.<sup>425</sup> Scobie believes that

[m]ost if not all of the sects refrained from participation in the Temple worship, but how far this was due to opposition to sacrifice as such is not clear; in some cases it seems to have been the result of opposition to the Jerusalem priesthood.<sup>426</sup>

That may well have been the case. However, there is obviously a critical lacuna in this surmise. Why was there such a negative attitude (and apparently quite a widespread one at that, since membership of the various disaffected movements is constantly cited in hundreds or thousands) against the Temple, its priesthood, and the sacrifices offered in it? Both the ministry and the movement of John the Baptist may give us some indication of the groundswell that churned beneath the surface of everyday life of the average Jewish person in the first half of the First Century C.E.

### 6.3 Late Second Temple Jewish Expectations

#### 6.3.1 Introduction

John the Baptist is presented in a few significant Lucan texts as one around whom the people of his time wove some distinct apocalyptic, eschatological and messianic expectations. The relationship that is established between John and Elijah on the one hand, and between John and Jesus on the other already attune the reader of Luke-Acts to a profounder significance of the role of John in both Lucan narrative and theology. This is especially evident when significant prophetic passages from the Old Testament are either directly applied to John the Baptist, or alluded to in relation to some aspect or other in John's life or activity. It is also striking how in at least three

<sup>424</sup> So Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 38; J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 12-13; J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, London, Macmillan, 1876, 371-380, J.M. Baumgarten, "Sacrifice and Worship Among the Jewish Sectarians of the Dead Sea (Qumran) Scrolls", *HTR* 46 (1953), 141-159.

<sup>425</sup> Chilton, however, dismisses this position. See his argument in "John the Baptist: His Immersion and his Death" in S.E. Porter & A.R. Cross, 2002, *Dimensions of Baptism*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 34-39.

<sup>426</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 38. See also J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 235.



instances in the Third Gospel John's name is pronounced in the same breath with that of Elijah (e.g. in Luke 1:17; 9:8; 9:19). The following are the texts in Luke-Acts that link John the Baptist with Elijah, with the expectations of the people of John's time, and also with some explicit or implicit Old Testament prophecies:

Luke 1:16-17

[John the Baptist] will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before [the Lord God], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

The source text in Malachi 4:5-6 reads as follows:

*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*

Another parallel from Sirach 48:10 reads:

*'At the appointed time', it is written, 'you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.'*"

Luke 3:2-6

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

The source text in Isaiah 40:3-5 reads thus:

*A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."*

Luke 3:15

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.

Luke 7:19-20

And John, calling to him two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they say, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"

Luke 7:26-27

"What then did you go out to see" A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'"

The source text in Malachi 3:1 reads as follows:

*"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."*

See also the similar text in Exodus 23:30

*"I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared."*

Luke 9:7-8

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen."

Luke 9:18-19

Now it happened that as [Jesus] was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, "Who do the people say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen."

Acts 13:25

"And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he.'"

Another 'expectation' text, though not related to John the Baptist, is Luke 24:21:

"But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

What these texts show is that John the Baptist not only lived in a context of general expectation associated with Elijah and with Old Testament eschatological prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi, but that not a few people of his time actually saw him as either the expected messiah himself or the prophet referred to in some Old Testament texts as sent by God to prepare the way for the messianic age. This is not surprising in itself for, as R. Price has noted, during and before John's time

a fervent expectation of the Messiah filled the Land...So widespread was this messianic hope that even the "despised" Samaritans were seen to share in the expectation: "I know that Messiah is coming" (John 4:25; see also verse 29)...[the people's] ardent messianism confirms that this age was one of common expectation.<sup>427</sup>

<sup>427</sup> R. Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 294.

### 6.3.2 *Jewish Expectations in the Time of John the Baptist*

Various elements emerge from the brief analysis of the general atmosphere of expectation that was the formative background for John the Baptist. We have noted, firstly, that there was an ardent messianic and apocalyptic expectation in the Judaism of John's time. We have noted, further, that, periodically, this expectation led to the formation of various revolutionary groups, to the extent that Herod became alarmed at the popularity of John the Baptist and at the vast crowds that he gathered around himself. At the beginning of this section we noted the texts in Luke's Gospel that directly linked John the Baptist to the messianic expectations of his time. It is time now to investigate this phenomenon further. To what extent and in what ways did John the Baptist appear to meet the messianic, apocalyptic and eschatological expectations of the people of his time? In this section we will consider the geographic setting associated with John, the content of John's proclamation and its association with messianic expectations, the link between John the Baptist and Elijah, as well as the real motivation behind Herod's killing of John.

Among the Synoptic Gospels, it is Mark who gives the fullest detail of John's lifestyle, diet, and clothing in the wilderness. Luke 1:80 only notes that John "was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation to Israel", and since this manifestation occurs two chapters later, when John is already preaching to the multitudes, it can be supposed that during the intervening period Luke's John lived in the wilderness under conditions similar to those of the Marcan John. Whichever way we look at it, however, the wilderness is very significant to John, for it is there that he concretely lives "in the spirit of Elijah" (Luke 1:17) and this association begins to take on very definite messianic tones in the popular perception.

We have noted above how various messianic movements are said by Josephus to have been based in the wilderness, for it is from the wilderness that the salvation of Israel was expected to come. It was in the wilderness that the prophet Elijah was translated to heaven, and it was to the wilderness that he was expected to return (2 Kings 2:14-18). It was to the wilderness of the river Jordan that Theudas, who told the people he was a prophet, "persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them" (*Ant.* xx.5.1). Similarly, it was in the wilderness that the prophet John the Baptist was

to be found (Luke 20:6 – the people were “convinced that John was a prophet.”). Through the wilderness, the link between John the Baptist and Elijah is established. Indeed, it is little wonder that there were some among the Jews who saw in John the Baptist’s person and indeed the lifestyle, proclamation and deeds of the long-awaited messiah. But did Jesus also see the messianic features in John? It is probable: after all, he travels a long distance in order that he might receive baptism (at least in Mark, Matthew and John’s Gospels, for, according to Luke, by the time Jesus was baptized John was already in prison). Secondly, the highest accolade ever given to anyone in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament is given to John by Jesus: “of all men born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist”. John is a prophet, yes, but much more than that. Belief in John is decisive for salvation, for since John people are fighting to enter the kingdom. John is a crucial stepping stone to the pending salvific action of God.

In Luke 1:17 it is said of the as yet unborn John the Baptist that he would come in “the spirit and power of Elijah”. It is said further that John would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” There was clearly some expectation centred around the figure of the prophet Elijah, just as there was an expectation of the preparedness and readiness of the people. The object of this preparation is made explicit in the prophet Malachi, who speaks of the coming of the “Day of the Lord” at the appointed time. It is for this that the people are to be prepared for: a day of judgment and vindication for righteous Israelites whose hearts shall have been turned to the Lord their God.

Later in Luke 3:15 the author notes that “the people were in expectation” of the anointed one. Later still, in Luke 7:18-19 John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask whether he might be “the one to come”, or whether they were to look for another – in other words whether they were to keep on waiting in expectation of the arrival of “the one”. It seems in order to draw the conclusion that there apparently was something about Jesus’ words and/or deeds that did not quite match with John’s expectations of “the coming one”.

But what precisely were those expectations? And what is the basis for the application of those expectations to John the Baptist? In other words, how is John the Baptist presented in Luke-Acts in relation to Elijah, and in relation to the Old Testament prophecies cited or alluded to? What follows is a brief survey of more or less contemporaneous Jewish writings from the Second Century B.C.E. to about the middle of the Second Century C.E. We will briefly consider the writings of the community associated with the Dead Sea scrolls, a community commonly referred to as the Qumran sect due to the geographical area of *Wadi Qumran* on the western shore of the northern end of the Dead Sea around which the scrolls were found by a young Arab shepherd in about 1947. We will also take into account the Pseudepigraphical<sup>428</sup> and Apocryphal<sup>429</sup> writings, as well as some of the writings of Josephus and, lastly, some excerpts from the mid-Second Century C.E. dialogue between Justin (a Christian) and Trypho (a Jew). It must be noted that this survey is only of a very limited section of Jewish writings of the period under review, and that they have been selected for their explicit messianic, apocalyptic or eschatological content.

### 6.3.2.1 *The Community of Qumran*

Khirbet Qumran has over the last decades captured the interest and imagination of scholars since the 1947 discovery in a cave by an Arab shepherd boy of jars containing what has since been commonly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Literature on both the scrolls as well as the community believed to have produced them runs into the thousands at the present moment.<sup>430</sup>

If the Dead Sea Scrolls have generated a lot of interest (and a corresponding level of controversy) among scholars, the community of Khirbet Qumran – almost

<sup>428</sup> A number of these writings either pre-date or are contemporaneous with the New Testament writings, and they provide a window into the beliefs of the Judaism of the First Century C.E.

<sup>429</sup> The Jewish Apocrypha consists of fifteen books written in the Second and First Centuries B.C.E. The sentiments of First Century C.E. Judaism are reflected in these writings.

<sup>430</sup> Some examples of recent works are: S. Talmon, *The World of Qumran from Within*; H. Shanks (ed.), *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*; H.K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1993; O. Betz & R. Riesner, *Jesus, Qumran, and the Vatican: Clarifications*, New York, Crossroad, 1994; G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, New York, Penguin Books, 1997; H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*; J. Maier, "Purity at Qumran: Cultic and Domestic" in A.J. Avery-Peck, J. Neusner, B.D. Chilton (eds.), *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, Part Five, Vol. 1.



unanimously accepted today as the producers of the scrolls – has had no less effect on historians, scholars and archaeologists.<sup>431</sup>

The origins of the Qumran community can be pieced together on the basis of scattered bits of information found in some of the community's writings that were discovered together with the other literary collections of the community. According to some extant though fragmentary writings, it would appear that the origins of the community of Qumran date back to about 190 B.C.E.<sup>432</sup> The group was led by the "Teacher of Righteousness" who is also believed to have been the founder of the community. The precise identity of the "Teacher of Righteousness" remains unknown for now. It would appear that he quarreled with the official priesthood of the Temple in Jerusalem and led his followers to Damascus, where he founded a "New Covenant" and eventually died. Some of the sectarians later settled in Qumran, where they established a strictly organized monastic life regulated by a series of Rules, of which the "Community Rule" or the "Manual of Discipline" is among the most well-known and studied. The significance of the Community Rule, among other aspects, is that it details the steps and procedures by which one became, remained, or even ceased to be a member of the community. The daily life of the community is regulated in some

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<sup>431</sup> However, it is to be noted that in his contribution ("Purity at Qumran: Cultic and Domestic") Maier has poured cold water on the common assumption that the remains of about eight hundred scrolls from caves 1-11 near Khirbet Qumran are related to (never mind the product of) a so-called "Qumran community". Such a community, according to Maier, is "only a hypothesis based on the identification of the people behind the texts with the Essenes, as they were described by Flavius Josephus" (:91). According to Maier, "it is now clear that the texts cannot be regarded as a 'sectarian' literature of a strictly separated community at Qumran alone. A number of texts, biblical and non-biblical, are older than the alleged 'community'" (:91). Further, Maier maintains that the "archaeological evidence does not favor the assumption of a communal centre at Qumran...Still, to date, we have only a feeble knowledge of the group or groups behind the Scrolls, and the function of the installations and caves at and near Khirbet Qumran is still a riddle. It is, for instance, a widespread assumption that most of the water basins at Qumran served as ritual baths, as described in Josephus' account of the Essenes. But the Qumran texts themselves and the archaeological evidence do not unequivocally confirm this assumption. It rests on the presupposition that Josephus' report concerns Qumran and nothing else" (:96). Maier's conclusion topples an entire edifice of scholarly and archaeological positions of about half a century's standing: "It thus appears that one of the most popular assumptions concerning the use of the water basins at Qumran is probably wrong" (:96). It is beyond the scope of our present purposes to pursue Maier's rather revolutionary position about the Scrolls and Qumran in general, and the "community" in particular. We refer the reader to the by no means small bibliography that Maier gives in the footnotes of his article, on pages 91-124.

<sup>432</sup> There are, of course, various theories regarding the origin of the community of Qumran. It is beyond the scope of this study to undertake a detailed analysis of the available data. However we note that R. Price, who had the opportunity to interview the discoverer of the Dead Sea Scrolls and to visit the caves of the Wadi Qumran with him offers some interesting theories of the origins of the community of Qumran. See his *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 103-122. See also J.J. Collins, "Was the Dead Sea Sect an Apocalyptic Movement", in L.H. Schiffmann (ed.), *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1990, 25-51.

detail by the same Rule. The community's settlement was destroyed by the Romans in 69 C.E. during the years of the Jewish revolt against Rome.

It is generally accepted that the writings of the community of Qumran present us with a unique glimpse into the eschatological expectations of the Judaism of the late Second Temple period as well as the early First Century C.E. Almost all the writings discovered at Qumran bear some witness to the fact that the community of Qumran was one of many apocalyptic Jewish sects of the period under review. Of these sects, the one represented by the community of Qumran still remains the best known, thanks to its extant literary works. The same writings show that messianic expectations were common during the period under review. Indeed, apocalypticism and messianism were the single most significant attitudes or orientations that informed the life as well as the religious and social structures of late Second Temple and early First Century C.E. Judaism.<sup>433</sup> The fact that the community of Qumran affords us a window into the eschatological perspectives of the time is significant for our understanding of the expectations of the people of John the Baptist's time. The life and ministry of John are set within a context that was deeply immersed in messianic and eschatological expectations, and this context is, for our purposes, best defined by the Dead Sea scrolls. It is now time to take a brief look at the nature, form and object(s) of the expectations of the community of Qumran as they emerge from a reading of some of its extant literature. Some other writings that were more or less contemporaneous with the Dead Sea scrolls will also be briefly considered. To what extent, however, can these writings be said to be representative of general Jewish expectation? Clearly the evidence adduced from them must be treated with a certain degree of caution, even though they do appear to have expressed messianic and eschatological beliefs consistent with the Judaism of the stated period. Caution in this regard is especially necessary if the motivations behind some of the various Jewish revolts against Roman rule are anything to go by. Some of these revolts will also be considered as we attempt to understand the nature and object of Jewish expectation around the time of

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<sup>433</sup> Though scholars have for some time noted that in the late Second Century period we can no longer speak of one unitary Judaism, but of *Judaisms*, since Jewish society in this time no longer had the appearance of one mainstream, but rather as various tributaries following divergent ideological perspectives and eschewing different (and even opposing) theological views, we will, for the purposes of this study, continue to speak of Judaism in the singular as a reference to a particular world view, and in clear distinction to other peoples and nationalities of the time.

John the Baptist, and how eventually these same expectations were linked with him in Luke-Acts.

### 6.3.2.2 *The Dead Sea Scrolls*

The Dead Sea scrolls are the product of "the most decidedly millenarian or chiliastic movement in Second Temple Judaism and possibly in antiquity altogether".<sup>434</sup> Apocalyptic expectations were the most characteristic feature of the community of Qumran. This community lived almost exclusively and actively in expectation of the end times, leading a life of almost permanent ritual purity in anticipation of God's decisive intervention and punitive judgment of the world.

The community of Qumran lived in a world and a general atmosphere that revolved around, and was shaped by sharply dualistic perspectives. They saw the world as consisting of two divisions of people: the righteous (variously referred to as the "sons of light", "sons of truth", "sons of justice") and the wicked (also called "sons of darkness", "sons of deceit"), people living in a world ruled by two spirits: the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit. The community saw themselves as the righteous and true Israel. In their dualistic view of the world, the community believed that they alone, the sons of light or of truth, would be saved on the day of God's judgment of the peoples of the world, a day on which all the others (the sons of darkness or the sons of deceit) would be destroyed. The *Community Rule* clearly demonstrates the community's conception of the world as reflecting a primary cosmic conflict between "two spirits": the forces of light and the forces of darkness; of truth and of deceit:

He created man to rule the world and placed within him two spirits so that he would walk with them until the moment of his visitation: they are the spirits of truth and of deceit. From the spring of light stem the generations of truth, and from the source of darkness the generations of deceit. And in the hand of the Prince of Lights is dominion over all the sons of justice; they walk on paths of light. And in the hand of the Angel of Darkness is total dominion over the sons of deceit; they walk on paths of darkness. From the Angel of Darkness stems the corruption of all the sons of justice, and all their sins, their iniquities, their guilts and their offensive deeds are under his dominion in compliance with the mysteries of God, until his moment; and all their afflictions and their periods of grief are caused by the dominion of his enmity; and all the spirits of his lot cause the sons of light to fall. However, the God of Israel and the angel of his truth assist all the sons of light. He created the spirits of light and of darkness and on them established every deed, [o]n their [path]s every labour and on their paths [eve]ry [labo]ur. God loves one of them for all eternal

<sup>434</sup> S. Talmon, *The World of Qumran From Within*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1989, 278.

[a]ges and in all his deeds he takes pleasure for ever; the other one he detests, his counsel and all his paths he hates forever. (1QS III.17-IV:1)<sup>435</sup>

The War Scroll describes a battle between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness", the term "sons of Light" being a designation for the members of the community.<sup>436</sup>

A stark contrast is also drawn between the rewards for the righteous (i.e. the community) and the punishment of the wicked (i.e. the rest of humanity) in 1QS IV.3-VIII.9-14:

[For the righteous, or the Sons of Light or of Truth] ... a spirit of meekness, of patience, generous compassion, eternal goodness, intelligence, understanding, potent wisdom which trusts in all the deeds of God and depends on his abundant mercy; a spirit of knowledge in all the plans of action, of enthusiasm for the decrees of justice, of holy plans with firm purpose, of generous compassion with all the sons of truth, of magnificent purity which detests all unclean idols, of careful behaviour in wisdom concerning everything, of concealment concerning the truth of the mysteries of knowledge...the reward of all those who walk in [the spirit of truth] will be healing, plentiful peace in a long life, fruitful offspring with all everlasting blessings, eternal enjoyment with endless life, and a crown of glory with majestic raiment in eternal light.

[For the wicked, or the Sons of Darkness] ... greed, sluggishness in the service of justice, wickedness, falsehood, pride, haughtiness of heart, dishonesty, trickery, cruelty, much insincerity, impatience, much foolishness, impudent enthusiasm for appalling acts performed in a lustful passion, filthy paths in the service of impurity, blasphemous tongue, blindness of eyes, hardness of hearing, stiffness of neck, hardness of heart in order to walk in all the paths of darkness and evil cunning. And the visitation of all those who walk in [the spirit of deceit] will be for an abundance of afflictions at the hands of all the angels of destruction, for eternal damnation by the scorching wrath of the God of revenges, for permanent terror and shame without end with the humiliation of destruction by the fire of the dark regions. And all the ages of their generations (they shall spend) in bitter weeping and harsh evils in the abysses of darkness until their destruction, without there being a remnant or a survivor for them.

Though the community of Qumran lived in ardent messianic expectation, its writings do not present a single or uniform or well developed messianic belief. Indeed, the impression is at times created that there could perhaps have been competing messianic expectations. In the community's writings there is evidence of the expectation of at least three messiahs: a Davidic messiah, the messiah of Aaron, and the messiah of

<sup>435</sup> See also 1QS IV.23-26.

<sup>436</sup> See 1QM I.1-17, and also 1QS III.13-26.



Israel.<sup>437</sup> There is, in addition, the expectation of an eschatological prophetic figure. The *Rule of the Congregation*, for example, explicitly mentions two messiahs:

At [a ses]sion of the men of renown, [those summoned to] the gathering of the community council, when [God] begets the Messiah with them: [the] chief [priest] of all the congregation of Israel shall enter, and all [his] br[others, the sons] of Aaron, the priests [summoned] to the assembly, the men of renown, and they shall sit be[fore him, each one] according to his dignity. After, [the Mess]iah of Israel shall [enter] and before him shall sit the heads of the th[ousands of Israel, each] one according to his dignity, according to [his] po[sition] in their camps and according to their marches....Afterwar[ds,] the Messiah of Israel [shall str]etch out his hands... (1QSa II.11-22)

Likewise, the *Community Rule* explicitly envisaged two messiahs:

They should not depart from any counsel of the law in order to walk in complete stubbornness of their heart, but instead shall be ruled by the first directives which the men of the Community began to be taught until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel. (1QS IX.9-11)

Reference is here made to both a royal Davidic messiah (the messiah of Israel) as well as to a priestly messiah (the messiah of Aaron), and also to an eschatological prophet. The imminent visitation of the prophet (Elijah?) as the precursor of the messiah(s) is expected in the *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521). This seems to point to Elijah as the eschatological prophet referred to elsewhere in the writings of the community (e.g. 1QS IX.9-11).

But were the messiahs (of Israel and of Aaron) on the same level of importance to the community? T.S. Beall has noted that

unusual in the community's view of the messiah(s) is that the priestly messiah is clearly elevated over the Davidic one. The royal messiah has an important role in establishing the kingdom and winning the battle against the sons of darkness. But the priestly messiah has an even more important function as the one who would lead in sacrifice and ritual and instruct the people in the Law. In some texts this latter function seems to be shared with the eschatological prophet.<sup>438</sup>

<sup>437</sup> R. Price (*Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 303-305) has identified four messianic characters portrayed in the expectations of the community of Qumran: the messiah of Moses, the messiah of David, the messiah of Aaron, and the messiah of Israel.

<sup>438</sup> T.S. Beall, "History and Eschatology at Qumran: Messiah", in A.J. Avery-Peck, J. Neusner & B. Chilton (eds.), *Judaism in Late Antiquity, The Judaism of Qumran: A Systemic Reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Part 5 Volume 2, Leiden, Brill, 2001, 144.



The *Damascus Document* is ambiguous in its reference to the coming of "the messiah of Aaron and Israel" (CD-B XIX.10-11). Is reference made here to one or to two messiahs?

The community of the Dead Sea scrolls based its expectation of a Davidic messianic figure on its interpretation of texts from the prophet Isaiah. The *Rule of War*, for example, quotes Isaiah 10:34-11:1, which it then interprets as: "[...] the bud of David. And they will go into battle with [...] [...] and the Prince of the Congregation will kill him" (4Q285, Frag. 5.3-4).

Elsewhere, in the "Commentaries on Isaiah", Isaiah 11:1-3, which overlaps with the text above is cited, and then it is interpreted thus:

[The interpretation of the word concerns the shoot] of David which will sprout in the fi[nal days, since] [with the breath of his lips he will execute] his [ene]my and God will support him with [the spirit of c]ourage [...] [...]thro]ne of glory, h[oly] crown and multi-colour[ed] vestments [...] in his hand. He will rule over all the pe[ople]s... (4Q161, Frags. 18-20)

Other citations relative to the messianic figure to come are found in the *Midrash on the Last Days*,<sup>439</sup> which cites passages from 2 Samuel and the prophet Amos. The messiah to come is in this midrash called "the Interpreter of the Law":

YHWH [de]clares to you that 2 Sam 7:12-14 "he will build you a house. I will raise up your seed after you and establish the throne of his kingdom [for ev]er. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me." This (refers to the) "branch of David", who will arise with the Interpreter of the law who [will rise up] in Zi[on in] the [l]ast days, as it is written: Amos 9:11 "I will raise up the hut of David which has fallen". This (refers to) "the hut of David which has fall[en]", w]hich he will raise up to save Israel. (4Q174, I.10-13)

In a similar vein, Numbers 24:17-19 is cited in *The War Scroll*: "A star will depart from Jacob, a sceptre will be raised in Israel" (1QM XI.6-7)

In the *Aramaic Apocalypse* the expected messianic figure is referred to as the "son of God" and the "son of the Most High":

He will be called son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High. Like the sparks that you saw, so will their kingdom be; they will rule several year[s] over the

<sup>439</sup> Also known as the *Florilegium*.

earth and crush everything; a people will crush another people, and a province another provi[n]ce. Until the people of God arises and makes everyone rest from the sword. His kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and all his paths in truth. He will jud[ge] the earth in truth and all will make peace. (4Q246, II.1-6)

The expectation of a prophetic figure is seen in *The Community Rule*:

They shall not depart from any counsel of the law in order to walk in complete stubbornness of their heart, but instead shall be ruled by the first directives which the men of the Community began to be taught until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel. (1QS IX.9-11)

In this text the eschatological prophet is expected together with the messiah(s).

Though this study of the messianism of the community of the Dead Sea scrolls has been rather brief, we can nonetheless note the following:

- (a) the community lived in expectation of a future judgment of God on behalf of his faithful people (by which is to be understood the members of the community) and against the wicked and the *Kittim*, namely Rome,
- (b) according to the War Scroll, which gives elaborate details of the battle to be waged between the sons of Light and the sons of Darkness, God would intervene on the side of the sons of Light, who would emerge victorious, and by this victory an ideal kingdom of God's people would be established. On the "Day of the Lord" would be ushered in a time of redemption for the true Israel (i.e. the community), a time of peace during which people would live for a thousand generations, and when evil would be destroyed,
- (c) the community does not appear to have had a single messianic belief system; rather they expected between one and three messianic figures (either a Davidic messiah, and/or two other messiahs – one of Aaron, and the other of Israel),
- (d) in addition to the messiahs, the community also expected a prophetic figure based on their interpretation of texts from Numbers, 2 Samuel, and Amos. Indeed, the community saw itself as playing an important role in the fulfillment of prophecies, living as they were in the times just before the end of time. The words "the last days" occur frequently in the writings of the community. This is seen, firstly, as a time of the testing and purification of

the community (4QFlor Frags. 1.1-8; 4.1-6). Secondly, the "last days" refers to the period of the beginning of Israel's salvation, a time when there will be a banquet that will be attended by the messiah of Israel (1QSa II.14-22). It is in "the last days" that the messiah(s) will come to save Israel, inaugurated by the advent of "the" prophet.

### 6.3.2.3 *Qumran and "Stumped Millenarianism"*

The question arises as to whether the community of the Dead Sea scrolls ever envisaged the possibility that their expectations might not be realized. In other words, did the community have a 'plan B' in case their expectations should not be fulfilled? As S. Talmon has noted:

they did not live to see their hopes materialize and thus were suspended in limbo between the real and the visionary stage of history. They present to us a prime example of stumped millenarianism.<sup>440</sup>

The *Pesher to Habakkuk* offers an interesting insight into how the community of the scrolls coped with the possible scenario of their expectations not being realized:

For the vision has an appointed time, it will have an end and not fail. Its interpretation: the final age will be extended and go beyond all that the prophets say, because the mysteries of God are wonderful. *Hab 2:3b* Though it might tarry, wait for it; it definitely has to come and will not delay. Its interpretation concerns the men of truth, those who observe the Law, whose hands will not desert the service of truth when the final age is extended beyond them, because all the ages of God will come at the right time, as he established for them in the mysteries of his prudence. (1QpHab VII.5-14)

Thus the community sought to cope with the dissonance of their situation. Texts from the prophets were reinterpreted in such a way as to cope with the delay in the arrival of "the last days". The following text from Habakkuk 2:3 was particularly apposite: "the final age will be extended and go beyond all that the prophets say, because the mysteries of God are wonderful. Though it might tarry, wait for it; it definitely has to come and will not delay.." Thus the community understood a postponement of the dawning of "the last days" and the delayed arrival of the messiah(s) without abandoning their hope in the occurrence of these events. They modified their

<sup>440</sup> A.S. Talmon, "Waiting for the Messiah at Qumran", in J. Neusner, W. Green & E. Frerichs (eds.), *Judaisms and Their Messiahs and the Turn of the Christian Era*, 115.

messianic perspective.<sup>441</sup> The earlier expectations were reformulated to accommodate a delayed eschatological action of God and the fulfillment of the prophecies. Some scholars trace the rise of the more militant revolutionary movements to a felt need for human intervention in order to hasten the dawning of the eschatological age.

If, then, there was going to be a delay or a postponement in the realization of the community's expectations, what was the community to do in the meantime? 1QS VIII.13-16 gives directives on how the community is to occupy itself in the interval: they are to observe the Law,<sup>442</sup> and

they are to be segregated from within the dwelling of the men of sin to walk to the desert in order to open there His path. As it is written (*Isa 40:3*): "In the desert, prepare the way of \*\*\*\*, straighten in the steppe a roadway for our God". This is the study of the law wh[i]ch he commanded through the hand of Moses, in order to act in compliance with all that has been revealed from age to age, and according to what the prophets have revealed through his holy spirit. (1QS VIII.13-16)

In this way the community was to await the final judgment and the final restoration of Israel. If the language of John the Baptist were to be applied retroactively, the community of Qumran was to prepare for the definitive divine intervention by 'bearing fruits that befit repentance' (Luke 3:8).

In summary, the community of the Dead Sea scrolls lived in ardent and active expectation of an action of God that would usher in an ideal kingdom for faithful Israel. Their lifestyle was one that, already in the present, offered a glimpse into the expected and purified life of the future. The question that arises, is, of course, whether this expectation was unique to the community of Qumran, or whether, indeed, there were also other sectors of the Jewish society that entertained similar messianic and eschatological expectations. We offer below a sample of expectations drawn from other Jewish writings contemporaneous with those of Qumran.

<sup>441</sup> See also R. Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 309-310.

<sup>442</sup> See 1QpHab VII.10-12.

#### 6.3.2.4 Other Early First Century C.E. Jewish Writings

The Dead Sea scrolls are not the only Jewish writings from around the First Century C.E. that provide a window to the Jewish expectations of the time. The Pseudepigraphical and Apocryphal writings also offer notable insights into Jewish messianic beliefs of that time. From among these we have some very significant indications of a messianic and eschatological expectation to be fulfilled at a time to be determined by God. Sections of some of the *Psalms of Solomon*, for example, recall how the sins of Israel had brought about the end of David's kingdom and then proceed to pray for a new Davidic king, to be raised for the people in a time known to God. Psalm 17:4-32 of the *Psalms of Solomon* is a good example, of which we quote only a few verses from the second part:

- 17:21    See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,  
          the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel  
          in the time known to you, O God.
- 17:22    Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers,  
          to purge Jerusalem from gentiles  
          who trample her to destruction;
- 17:23    in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out  
          the sinners from the inheritance;  
          to smash the arrogance of sinners  
          like a potter's jar;
- 17:24    To shatter all their substance with an iron rod;  
          to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth;
- 17:25    At his warning the nations will flee from his presence;  
          and he will condemn sinners by the thoughts of their hearts.

If we may borrow terminology from the Dead Sea scrolls, the psalmist clearly hopes for a political messiah whose role would be to restore the Davidic kingdom.

In the *Ethiopian Apocalypse of Enoch* 9:9-13 the object of the messianic expectation is expressed in the symbolic language of a horn:

- 90:9    I kept seeing till those lambs grew horns; but the ravens crushed their horns. Then I kept  
          seeing till one great horn sprouted on one of those sheep, and he opened their eyes; and  
          they had vision in them and their eyes were opened.
- 90:12   Those ravens gather and battle with him (the horned ram) and seek to remove his horn,  
          but without any success.
- 90:13   I saw thereafter the shepherds coming; and those vultures and kites cried aloud to the



The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19).

The source text in Isaiah reads as follows:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

When John, in prison, in what could perhaps be described as a moment of darkness and despair, sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask whether he might be the expected one, Jesus, in response, cites again from, and elaborates on the same passage of Isaiah:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. (Luke 7:22)

In other words, Jesus tells John's messengers to go back to him and inform him that he (Jesus) was doing the works of the anticipated Jewish messiah.

The messiah was expected to bring about justice in relation to one's neighbour and piety in relation to God, and both of these qualities were to be manifested in different though related ways in John's proclamation:

Bear fruits that befit repentance...He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation... (Luke 3:8-14)

It was the common expectation that the messiah would bring good news, and that he himself would be good news. The author of Luke-Acts specifically notes that John "preached good news to the people" (Luke 3:18) while Jesus proclaims later on that he also has brought good news (Luke 4:21-22).

The characteristics of the expected messiah are spread throughout the writings of the period under review. We have just seen, for example, how the role of the messiah

Jesus, in other words, tells John's messengers to go back and tell him that he (Jesus) is doing the works of the anticipated messiah, including raising people from the dead, which the *Messianic Apocalypse* explicitly attributes to the messiah.

#### 6.3.4.4 Acts 1:6

Just before the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1:6-12 the apostles ask him: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" The occurrence of this question here is significant. In the first place, its timing within the Lucan narrative is noteworthy: it is as if the apostles, realizing that Jesus is about to depart from them, need assurance that Jesus will not leave before he has fulfilled the expectation they all had of him, namely that he was indeed expected to bring about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Secondly, we have already encountered this expectation in Luke 24:21, and now, before Jesus' departure, the reader of Luke-Acts realizes that the restoration of the kingdom of Israel by Jesus was the expectation of not just the two companions on their way to Emmaus, but that indeed it was the expectation of all of the apostles and, by extension, of the larger body of Jesus' disciples. Indeed, Luke 19:11 makes this explicit: the crowds supposed that through the life and deeds of Jesus "the kingdom of God was to appear immediately". And yet, as it would appear to the apostles' dismay, Jesus was about to disappear before he had fulfilled the one great expectation that they and all the people had of him.

Jesus' response is equally notable: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Apart from making it clear that he is not the one through whom the particular expectation of a political messiah was to be fulfilled, Jesus' response tells his apostles that they are to continue living in (political) messianic expectation. Indeed, the exhortation implicit in the statement of the two men in white robes who stand next to the apostles when Jesus has departed makes it evident that the expectation is to continue: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). In other words, in the mean time the apostles are to get about their business, because they do not know the "times or seasons" which God has fixed by his own authority for the fulfillment of the prophecies. This is in fact what the apostles do, for in Acts 1:14 the reader is informed that, having returned to Jerusalem, they "with one accord devoted

themselves to prayer", while Peter began to prepare the gathered brethren (numbering "in all about a hundred and twenty" – Acts 1:15) for the election of the replacement for Judas Iscariot .

Jesus' response to the apostles ("It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" – Acts 1:7) recalls the postponed messianic age of the community of Qumran. There too, the realization eventually dawned that the expected messianic age would not be forthcoming in the immediate future, but that "the final age will be extended and go beyond all that the prophets say, because the mysteries of God are wonderful. Though it might tarry, wait for it".<sup>446</sup>

### ***6.3.5 Messianic Expectations and the Revolutionary Movements***

We noted above how it is possible that, in some way, the delay in the fulfillment of the expectations of the various messianic groups within the Judaism of the early First Century C.E. gave rise to revolutionary movements of varying persuasions. Josephus gives accounts of several insurrectionist groups, a good number of whom appear to have messianic hopes, and whose leaders had themselves messianic pretensions. Josephus himself does not, however, use the word 'messianic' in his writings, possibly for political reasons. Any messianic concept was readily interpreted as subversive by the Roman authorities whom Josephus appears to have written primarily in order to please. Instead he presents, in case after case, the leaders of the rebellious Jewish movements as ill-advised, and their followers as nothing more than gullible rabble. Below is a brief consideration of some of these movements, together with the sources in Josephus where they are discussed:

#### **Antiquities xviii.4.1**

The Samaritan nation too was not exempt from disturbance. For a man who made light of mendacity and in all his designs catered to the mob, rallied them, bidding them go in a body with him to Mount Gerizim, which in their belief is the most sacred of mountains. He assured them that on their arrival he would show them the sacred vessels which were buried there, where Moses had deposited them. His hearers, viewing this tale as plausible, appeared in arms. They posted themselves in a certain village named Tirathana, and, as they planned to climb the mountain in a great multitude, they welcomed to their ranks new arrivals who kept coming. But before they could ascend, Pilate blocked their projected route up the mountain with a detachment of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry, who in an encounter with the firstcomers in the village slew some in a pitched battle and put the others to flight.

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<sup>446</sup> See 1QpHab VII.5-14.

Many prisoners were taken, of whom Pilate put to death the principal leaders and those who were most influential among the fugitives.

#### Antiquities xx.5.1

During the period when Fadus was procurator of Judaea, a certain impostor named Theudas persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage. With this talk he deceived many. Fadus, however, did not permit them to reap the fruit of their folly, but sent against them a squadron of cavalry. These fell upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them and took many prisoners. Theudas himself was captured, whereupon they cut off his head and brought it to Jerusalem.

#### Antiquities xx.8.6

Impostors and deceivers called upon the mob to follow them into the desert. For they said that they would show them unmistakable marvels and signs that would be wrought in harmony with God's design. Many were, in fact, persuaded and paid the penalty of their folly; for they were brought before Felix and he punished them. At this time there came to Jerusalem from Egypt a man who declared that he was a prophet and advised the masses of the common people to go out with him to the mountain called the Mount of Olives, which lies opposite the city at a distance of five furlongs. For he asserted that he wished to demonstrate from there that at his command Jerusalem's walls would fall down, through which he promised to provide them an entrance into the city. When Felix heard of this he ordered his soldiers to take up their arms. Setting out from Jerusalem with a large force of cavalry and infantry, he fell upon the Egyptian and his followers, slaying four hundred of them and taking two hundred prisoners. The Egyptian himself escaped from the battle and disappeared. And now the brigands once more incited the populace to war with Rome, telling them not to obey them.

#### War vi.5.4

But what more than all else incited [the Jews] to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world. This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it.

Our brief survey of the expectations of the Jewish people around the time of John the Baptist brings to the fore various common elements in the expectations of these revolutionary groups within Judaism. Firstly, there were many messianic and apocalyptic sects in late Second Temple Judaism, although in the current state of research there is detailed knowledge of only one, the Qumran sect. Secondly, these revolutionary groupings arose in times of desperation, when Judaism generally suffered from oppressive foreign rule and from loss of national independence. Consequently, in this environment there began to be hopes of the restoration of Judaism, both a spiritual as well as a political restoration under the rule of one whom God would anoint. Eventually this expectation took on Utopian proportions.

Thirdly, in almost all of these groups, messianic expectation was closely associated with the leader's claim to prophecy, or with the wilderness, or at least not easily habitable locales: thus for example Mount Gerizim, the river Jordan, or simply the wilderness or desert. One cannot fail to anticipate an almost inevitable association of John the Baptist, the wilderness, and the messianic expectations of his time.

Fourthly, even a superficial reading of Josephus' description of the various insurrectionist movements of the time shows that any would-be messiah would have found no shortage of followers. Indeed, according to Josephus Theudas managed to persuade "the majority of the masses" (*Ant.* xx.5.1). Similarly the Egyptian managed to convince "the masses of the common people", and when this revolt was put down Josephus writes of "four hundred of them" being killed and "two hundred" taken prisoner (*Ant.* xx.8.6). Presumably some managed to escape. In any case, the would-be messianic figures succeeded in each instance to gain the sympathies and active support of substantial numbers of people, indicating that messianic expectations were in the very air that the people breathed, and despite the fact that the Romans quashed one uprising after another with ever greater savagery and determination, we find these movements drawing large numbers of followers as late as the Bar Kochba revolt well into the Second Century C.E. This places in messianic perspective Herod's political decision to do away with John the Baptist for, as Josephus tells us, the crowds attracted to John looked as if they would do anything John commanded. In Herod's analysis, John the Baptist and his followers were an insurrection waiting to happen, and it was his responsibility to nip it in the bud. Thus John the Baptist was killed as a messianic figure around whom and with whom vast crowds were beginning to associate themselves. For Herod, therefore, John the Baptist was but one more figure in a string of would-be messianic leaders who were a thorn in the flesh of the administration.

Other writings more or less contemporaneous with Josephus, give or take a few decades, also give a clear indication of the general atmosphere of expectation. The dialogue between Justin (a Christian) and Trypho (a Jew), though written about the middle of the Second Century C.E., presents an interesting perspective on what Jews believed about the coming messiah. According to this writing, the Jews by this time believed that the messiah himself would not even know that he was the messiah until



Elijah came to announce him. But that the messiah would certainly come was not in doubt:

Chapter VIII  
(Trypho speaking)

But Christ, if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere, is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elias come to anoint Him, and make Him manifest to all. And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing. (ANF, 1:198)

Chapter XLIX  
(Trypho speaking)

Those who affirm him to have been a man, and to have been anointed by election, and then have become Christ, appear to me to speak more plausibly than you who hold those opinions which you express. For we all expect that Christ will be a man [born] of men, and that Elijah when he comes will anoint him. But if this man appear to be Christ, he must certainly be known as man [born] of men; but from the circumstance that Elijah has not yet come, I infer that this man is not he [the Christ]. (ANF, 1:219)

Chapter CX  
(Justin speaking)

And when I had finished these words, I continued: "Now I am aware that your teachers, sirs, admit the whole of the words of this passage to refer to Christ; and I am likewise aware that they maintain He has not yet come; or if they say that He has come, they assert that it is not known who He is; but when He shall become manifest and glorious, then it shall be known who He is. And then, they say, the events mentioned in this passage shall happen, just as if there was no fruit as yet from the words of the prophecy." (ANF, 1:253).

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. we see a change in the function of the expected messianic figure. While the Dead Sea scrolls as well as the beliefs of the revolutionary movements are consistent in their expectation of one or more political messianic figures, in the post-70 C.E. era the expectation is typically of a non-political messiah. The messiah becomes a sort of transcendent heavenly figure. This may, of course, not necessarily mean that there was no expectation of a non-political messianic and eschatological figure in the pre-70 C.E. period<sup>447</sup>, or that there was no expectation of a military-style eschatological figure in the post-70 C.E., but this is based on the nature of the evidence in the extant writings. The caution in respect of our assessment of the extant sources that has been sounded above is certainly necessary here.

<sup>447</sup> It is noted that Bar Kochba was very popular as a military messiah and was supported by highly respected rabbis like Aqiba.

## 7. THE MOVEMENT OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

### 7.1 *John the Baptist's Movement*

Characteristic of the movements of First Century Palestine and earlier was that they were formed around a charismatic leader who attracted "disciples" who held views similar to their leader. The composition of the "school" that thus emerged varied greatly. We recall that Jesus' close group of twelve apostles included fishermen (Luke 5:1-11), a zealot (Luke 6:5; Acts 1:13), a mercenary of sorts, young and old. His larger school of disciples was of an even more varied composition in addition to those already mentioned: it consisted of both men and women (Luke 8:2-3; 24:10-11), Jews and Gentiles (Luke 7:2-10; Acts 10:22-48), a tax collector (Luke 5:27-28), women of questionable morals (Luke 7:37-50), rich (Luke 5:27-29) and poor (Luke 21:2), outcasts (Luke 5:27-30; 7:22; 17:12-19), as well as pillars of society (Luke 7:31-50; 8:40-42).

Though we do occasionally come across references to the disciples of John (Luke 5:33-35; 7:18-23; 11:1; Acts 18:24-25; 19:1-6), we have very little direct information on them. It is, for example, difficult to determine the specifics of the composition of John's disciples compared to those of Jesus. Nor is it possible to determine the number of John's followers, whereas those of Jesus are at times spoken of in thousands (for example the five thousand that were fed [Luke 9:14-17], and the many other thousands converted in Acts 2:41-42 and similar texts), while at times they are simply referred to as "great crowds" or "a great many people" (Luke 6:17-19; 8:4), in each case a large mass of people being indicated. However scant our direct information on the disciples of John, it is nevertheless possible to note the following:-

- (a) there is a likelihood that, as we will see, from the very beginning John's disciples were drawn from both Jewish and Gentile sectors of the Palestinian and Trans-Jordanian population;
- (b) all sorts of people were drawn to John's message and were converted by it, specifically people engaged in professions that set them apart as a despised section of the Jewish population, such as for example the tax collectors (Luke 3:12-13) and soldiers (Luke 3:14);

(c) we know further that John's disciples fasted (Luke 5:33-35) and that John taught them to pray (Luke 11:2), while Jesus is mostly shown as praying alone (for example at Luke 5:16; 11:1);

(d) we also know that John's movement continued to exist and was dispersed far and wide long after his death, for we meet some of them in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7), and some scholars like E. Lupieri believe that John's movement continues to exist in our own time in some form of the Mandaean;<sup>448</sup>

(e) and we also know that John's movement was not sectarian (in the sense of drawing apart and living a solitary life apart from mainstream Judaism as, for example, the Qumran sectarians did). It would have been difficult to be a tax collector or a soldier in a puritanical community like that of Qumran. Indeed, John "went into all the region about the Jordan" (Luke 3:3) and great crowds flocked to him. Essene communities lived in a way that set them apart from both Gentiles and ordinary Jews of their time. John's was an open and public ministry not limited to one location only, though some scholars have attempted to pinpoint with geographical precision the precise spot from which John preached and exercised his baptizing ministry;<sup>449</sup> and, finally,

(f) there is nowhere an indication that John's movement, like some of the movements of his time (for example the zealots and the *sicarii*), was politically motivated. The question will also be discussed as to whether John's movement had anything to do with the Essenes, or whether John was in any way associated with the community of Qumran. We will also consider whether John's movement was opposed to the Temple and the Jerusalem priesthood. There were also water ablutions practised by the priests in the Temple: why did John institute his own ritual? Finally, what are we to make of the believers in Ephesus who, according to Acts 18:25 and 19:1-7 "knew only the baptism of John"?

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<sup>448</sup> See, for example, the study of E. Lupieri, *The Mandaean*. This book has been acclaimed in the reviews (back flap) as making "an important contribution to the study of a religion...among the most ancient of the world's living religions...whose modern adherents are largely unknown..."

<sup>449</sup> See, for example, H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 213.

## 7.2 Was John the Baptist Connected With Qumran?

Since the discoveries at Qumran some scholars have surmised that prior to his public life and ministry John was in contact with the Jewish sect that produced the scrolls for which Qumran has become famous. The question as to whether John was in any way (and to what degree) connected with the Essenes has been debated by scholars for decades. Not a few scholars believe that John had some contact with the Essenes<sup>450</sup> ("the nature of this connection is far from clear"<sup>451</sup> – some proponents of this position admit), or that he was actually one of them, having been, as it is supposed, brought up by them.<sup>452</sup> This position is based on what, in our view, is a questionable exegesis of Luke 1:80: "And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel". Our own understanding of this text in its narrative context is similar to that of H. Stegemann.<sup>453</sup> The author of Luke-Acts does not indicate where the wilderness in which John "grew and became strong" was located. The "region about the Jordan" that the author refers to in Luke 3:3 is related to John's calling and ministry. Luke 1:80 is a redactional note of the author that links Luke 1:67-79 (the birth of John) with Luke 3:1-20 (the ministry of John). As H. Stegemann has noted, the author of Luke-Acts employs the same narrative device in the story of Jesus, by means of which the narrative about the child Jesus (Luke 2:36-38) is linked to the narrative of the adult Jesus (Luke 3:23) by inserting the narrative of the young man Jesus aged twelve (Luke 2:41-50). In other words, Luke 1:80 is a narrative bridge created by the author of Luke-Acts and thus appears not to lend itself to being taken as historical.

C. Scobie is, however, so convinced that John was an Essene that he can maintain that it is the Essene movement "which forms the background of John's life and work...John's ministry was marked especially by the rite of baptism, which figures so prominently also in the sectarian movement."<sup>454</sup> From his initial life with the

<sup>450</sup> See, for example, S.L. Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth", *NTS* 29 (1983), 569-571, especially 569; C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 37-40; J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 13.

<sup>451</sup> S.L. Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth", 570, n.1.

<sup>452</sup> See C. Scobie's assertion that "It is...possible that John, as a boy, was adopted by the Baptist sects" (*John the Baptist*, 58; see also 59). See also A.S. Geyser who says that John's "outward appearance, words and acts betray that he has been formed by one or other of the Essene sects inhabiting that very region between Khirbet-Qumran and Masada" in "The Youth of John the Baptist: A Deduction from the Break in the Parallel Account of the Lucan Infancy Story", *NovT* 1 (1956), 70-75.

<sup>453</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 225.

<sup>454</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 39. See also page 58.

Essenes, continues Scobie, John "went on to become an original and independent preacher."<sup>455</sup>

Another reason for believing that John was an Essene is based on his diet of locusts and wild honey. Though there is no parallel in Luke-Acts, this reference to John's wilderness food in Mark 1:6 has been taken by some to reflect John's Essene background. S.L. Davies, for example, writes:

John the Baptist, if an Essene, could have eaten within desert settlements or large towns but could not and would not have eaten food purchased from or prepared by non-Essenes. The same would be true if John had sincerely taken the Essene oath but had left the movement permanently. When in the desert or in small towns such as were in the Jordan valley John would be required to eat only certain herbs and locusts and wild honey. These foods, found in the wild, would thus be free from any suspicion of impurity.<sup>456</sup>

Yet some other scholars have gone so far as to put forward what they believe to be evidence that John's father (Zechariah) held views similar to those of the sectarians of Qumran and was generally in sympathy with them.<sup>457</sup> Diverse other hypotheses ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous have been propounded, the latter perhaps exemplified by J.L. Price: "Perhaps when he went to Jerusalem to be ordained to the priesthood, the conduct of the priests provoked John to indignation and he fled to the wilderness."<sup>458</sup>

There are, however, other scholars who, perhaps more convincingly, argue that John was *not* an Essene, though he probably knew of them. H. Stegemann has argued that

John the Baptist was neither an Essene nor a spiritual pupil of the Essenes. Were he ever to have made the effort to walk over to Qumran, as a non-Essene he would have been denied entry, and at best provided with enough food and drink for the long walk back.<sup>459</sup>

<sup>455</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 58. See also J.A.T. Robinson, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community" in his *Twelve New Testament Studies*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1962, 11-27; O. Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" in H. Shanks (ed.), *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reader from the Biblical Archaeology Review*, New York, Random House, 1992, 205-214.

<sup>456</sup> S.L. Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth", 570.

<sup>457</sup> See, for example, K. Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community*, 126-127.

<sup>458</sup> J.L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961, 270.

<sup>459</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 225. See also pages 221-225.



J.E. Taylor concludes her study of this particular question in the section of her work with the title "John and the Essenes" with the observation that

The notion that there was a "Baptist movement" – to which both the Essenes and John belonged – out of line with "mainstream Judaism" rests on outdated presuppositions regarding Second Temple Judaism. John and the Essenes used immersion, and both types of immersion may have been for purification, but this probably derives from the fact that issues of purity were very important to all groups of Jews at this time [...John] rejected cultivated food like bread and wine, whereas the Essenes considered these staples of their diet, as did most others. His clothing of camel hair sackcloth indicated his humility before God; he did not wear the white garments of an Essene [...] In short, the overwhelming impression is that John should probably not be seen as having any direct relationship with the Essenes, least of all the isolated group at Qumran, whether prior to or during his own prophetic activity by the river Jordan.<sup>460</sup>

If, as Josephus tells us, there were communities of Essenes in most towns and centres of Judaea,<sup>461</sup> and that some of them moved out to the wilderness, especially the Jordan valley which became the movement's "real centre",<sup>462</sup> it is unlikely that John would not have known of them. On the other hand, even though Josephus also tells us that the Essenes adopted young children "while they are yet pliable and docile" and taught them their doctrine,<sup>463</sup> it is surely going beyond the context of the text to interpret Luke 1:80 ("And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel") as showing that the reference to "the wilderness" means John was one of these children adopted by the Essenes.<sup>464</sup> Some reasons given for this position, like his parents, being elderly, died while the child John was still very young, though logical in their own way, are nothing more than simple speculation. Certainly John had life in the wilderness in common not only with the Essenes, or with the community of Qumran, but also with some of the revolutionary movements who lived in expectation of the dawning of the eschatological and messianic age. There was no intrinsic connection between living in the wilderness and being one of the Essenes, though there were certainly areas of similarity of lifestyle.

<sup>460</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 48. See also 20-24.

<sup>461</sup> *War* ii.119-161.

<sup>462</sup> See C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 37.

<sup>463</sup> *War* ii.8.

<sup>464</sup> So S.L. Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth", 570.

Of course there were areas of convergence between John and the community of Qumran, among which the following have also been noted:

- (a) both lived in the wilderness in relation with Isaiah 40:3,
- (b) the demand of both for repentance, and
- (c) their practice of ritual immersion in water.

However, the vagueness of Luke 1:80 ("And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel"), and the fact that this verse serves as a literary and redactional link used by Luke to enable him to have John make his public appearance where he grew up,<sup>465</sup> is not in itself sufficient to support the conjecture that John was brought up by, or among the Essenes. According to G. Theissen and A. Merz these areas of convergence between John and the Essenes of Qumran "points more towards a rival prophetic claim with sometimes comparable basic convictions".<sup>466</sup>

D.R. Swartz has noted other parallels between John and the members of the community of Qumran. Indeed, for Swartz, it is "This ascetic community by the Dead Sea [that] shows us the setting according to which [John] is to be understood."<sup>467</sup>

The question arises, however, as to how closely the search for parallels between John and the community of the Dead Sea scrolls is to be pursued. We look at three<sup>468</sup> of the parallels as examples for *not* too quickly seeing or establishing parallels between John and the community of Qumran.

<sup>465</sup> See G. Theissen & A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.

<sup>466</sup> G. Theissen & A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.

<sup>467</sup> D.R. Swartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1992, 3.

<sup>468</sup> J.I.H. McDonald ("What Did You Come Out to See?", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000) has selected six from the many parallels between John and the community of Qumran adduced by D. Schwartz and others (the six being Desert/Wilderness, Isaiah 40:3, Asceticism, Ritual Purity and Immersion, Priestly Background, and the Sharing of Property). McDonald acknowledges there may be similarities between John and the community of Qumran, but these similarities "do not prove identity and must be balanced by dissimilarities." McDonald concludes his analysis of the six parallels by noting that "The setting according to which John is to be understood is not Qumran nor even the Essenes as a wider movement but late Second Temple Judaism" (:59).

(a) The Wilderness

Both John and the community of Qumran lived in the wilderness. For this reason, C. Scobie sees John as "sharing in the 'wilderness eschatology' of the sectarian movement".<sup>469</sup> Luke 1:80 is seen as supporting the belief that John was not only located in the wilderness, but specifically at Qumran. But John's area of operation in the wilderness was not limited to just one locale; it is indicated as being in the Jordan valley, or in Peraea. Nowhere, indeed, is it indicated as being the wilderness of Judaea, or near the Dead Sea. It is certainly probable that John's area of operation may also have been used by some groups of the Essenes as we have noted above, but there is no convincing argument for John's geographical proximity to Qumran.

(b) The Application of Isaiah 40:3

In Luke 3:4 we find applied to John this quotation of Isaiah 40:3: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". In the *Community Rule* of Qumran we read:

And when these have become a community in Israel in compliance with these arrangements they are to be segregated from within the dwelling of the men of sin to walk to the desert in order to open there His path. As it is written (Isa 40:3): "In the desert, prepare the way of [the Lord], straighten in the steppe a roadway for our God". This is the study of the law wh[i]ch he commanded through the hand of Moses, in order to act in compliance with all that has been revealed from age to age. (1QS VIII.13-16; see also 1QS IX.19-20)

W.H. Brownlee<sup>470</sup> was among the first to claim that Isaiah 40:3 showed that John was at home with the views of the Qumran community with regard to the dawning of the expected messianic era. Firstly, as we will show below, the expectation of a messianic figure was not unique to the community of Qumran. Many sectors of Judaism beyond the limited confines of Qumran actively lived in anticipation of the advent of the messiah. This perspective already existed in the time of the prophets, as the quotation from Isaiah 40:3 indicates. It was therefore not necessary for a Jewish person to be a member of the community of Qumran in order to expect a messianic era, and in this respect therefore John was like many Jews of his time.

<sup>469</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 46.

<sup>470</sup> See, for example, in his "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls" in K. Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls in the New Testament*, New York, Harper, 1957, 73.

John the Baptizer's activities and action, then, can be explained apart from any influence by Qumran. His ascetic lifestyle was in accord with Old Testament Nazirite vows...it is possible that John may have spent some time with the Sect prior to his public ministry; however, nothing in the biblical account calls for this assumption...the similarities between John the Baptizer and the Qumran Sect were probably because of commonly held Old Testament distinctions rather than the Sect's direct influence on John's life.<sup>474</sup>

### 7.3 *Was John the Baptist Opposed to the Temple?*

Was John's movement in opposition to the Temple and its priesthood? The fact that John started his own ritual of cleansing through his practice of baptism has led some scholars to believe that this act was in opposition to the priesthood in the Temple. These scholars note that rituals for cleansing or purity were performed in the Temple, and that therefore there was as such no need for John to create his own ritual which was exercised far from the Temple. J. Thomas, for example, is convinced that

Josèphe nous serait garant de ces faits: que les Esséniens ont abandonné, partiellement du moins, le temple de Jérusalem, qu'ils ont délaissé les sacrifices, qu'ils ont remplacé ceux-ci par des exercices nouveaux de culte, notamment par les purifications et les repas sacrés, et même qu'ils ont renoncé au temple et aux sacrifices parce qu'ils préféraient à cela leurs purifications quotidiennes.<sup>475</sup>

J.D. Crossan holds that "any...baptism anywhere would have cast negative aspersions, be they explicit or implicit, on the Temple cult."<sup>476</sup>

C. Scobie is equally convinced that "opposition to the Temple and its sacrifices is another characteristic of the baptist movement", though "how far this was due to opposition to sacrifice as such is not clear."<sup>477</sup> Scobie says further that it is the Essene movement

which forms the background of John's life and work...John's ministry was marked especially by the rite of baptism, which figures so prominently also in the sectarian movement. John's asceticism places him in line with these Baptist groups, but out of line with orthodox Judaism. John's attitude to orthodox Judaism and to the Jerusalem authorities marks him out as a sectarian and a non-conformist.<sup>478</sup>

But this view of Scobie's is untenable, as is his other assertion that sees John

<sup>474</sup> R. Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 169.

<sup>475</sup> J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 13.

<sup>476</sup> J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 235.

<sup>477</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 38.

<sup>478</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 39.

in the context of a number of roughly similar groups active in the Jordan valley area and making up a non-conformist, baptist, sectarian movement within the Judaism of the period.<sup>479</sup>

W. Wink also accepts the thesis that the baptist movements were "a movement of protest against contemporary piety". Further, Wink characterizes the baptist movements as "heterodox, schismatic, highly individualistic, quick to shift to the latest 'revelation', and capable of borrowing from one another without establishing relationships of dependency."<sup>480</sup>

These positions fail to convince because they do not take into account various elements. We indicate here three of the more significant:

(a) Firstly, there is a misleading notion that there was a sizeable (indeed mainstream) Judaism that was anti-ritual purity, and specifically anti-immersion as a means towards the attainment of that purity. But the opposite is true. The Torah explicitly prescribed immersion as one of the means of attaining purity. All groups within Judaism would have practiced some form of immersion as a cleansing ritual. The use of this medium by John the Baptist and other baptist groups would not have set them apart from mainstream Judaism, for water purification was in no way a novelty, but the forgiveness of sin associated with John's baptism was unique. The Sixth Division of the Mishnah (which deals with "laws on the preservation of cultic purity both in the Temple and under certain domestic circumstances"<sup>481</sup>) also shows that the fact that John and his contemporary baptists practised this away from the Temple did not itself make them *ipso facto* anti-Temple.

As J.E. Taylor has noted,

Immersion [itself] was never a substitution for Temple sacrifices...evidence in apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature for people atoning for sin through various procedures shows that repentance and faith need not at all reflect rejection of the Temple cult; the evidence suggests only that those were seen as alternatives or complements to the Temple rites in some circles, especially, one may imagine, in the Diaspora.<sup>482</sup>

<sup>479</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 69.

<sup>480</sup> W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 108.

<sup>481</sup> J. Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, xv.

<sup>482</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 31.



(b) Secondly, the views of J. Thomas, C. Scobie, W. Wink and others who subscribe to the thesis that John the Baptist and the Jewish baptist movements in general were anti-Temple are wont to lead the reader into believing that there were numerous groups in the Judaism of John the Baptist's time that exhibited anti-Temple sentiments; that, in fact, there was wholesale Temple revolt in Israel at the time. As shown above, there were many groups (some of them baptists) who practiced various forms of ritual purification outside the Temple (not least the Jews of the Diaspora). Matters related to ritual purity – regardless of where they were practiced – remained very important to the Pharisees as well as to the later rabbis.<sup>483</sup> Though there were various groups within the Judaism of John's time that exercised various forms of ritual purity (a fact that, as we have argued, did not represent a break with the Temple), there was no wholesale rebellion against the Temple or its rituals.

J.E. Taylor has convincingly shown that there are hardly any substantial grounds for believing that John and his movement were anti-Temple:

John made no statement known to us that he considered the Temple in Jerusalem defiled and therefore irrelevant to the way of righteousness, whereas this was a fundamental belief of the Essenes, including the Qumran group (Cf. 1QS 1:11-13; 8:6-10; 9:4-5).<sup>484</sup>

Furthermore, Taylor rightly reminds us that

If the Gospel tradition has omitted to tell us that John asked his converts to go to the Temple and sacrifice, this is not to say that he could not have done so [...] We do not need to see John as anti-Temple simply because he endorsed the primacy of repentance and righteousness over sacrificing in regard to atonement and forgiveness.<sup>485</sup>

<sup>483</sup> This is evidenced, for example, in the very detailed treatment of regulations relating to ritual purity in the Sixth Division (*Taanit*) of the Mishnah.

<sup>484</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 29.

<sup>485</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 110. This is *contra* J.L. Webb who holds that, given the socio-political reality of John's time (in which the Sadducees and chief priests – who accommodated themselves to a foreign occupying power [Rome] and enriched themselves in the process), "John's baptism, functioning to mediate forgiveness, offered an alternative to a primary function of the temple, and so was a threat to the temple establishment. As John grew in popularity, he would probably have been perceived as a real threat to those whose authority was grounded in the temple" (*John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 204. See also 203-205).

Taylor goes on to draw parallels with the practice of Jesus: after having cleansed a leper, Jesus advises him to go to the Temple and to do everything in accordance with the Law (Luke 5:12-16). While Taylor tends to stretch her argument from silence a little too far by overly stressing the point, her basic argument<sup>486</sup> is nonetheless very convincing.

(c) R.L. Webb leans rather heavily on the putative priestly descent of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5) to argue the position that John was anti-Temple. The fact that John is nowhere described as serving in the Temple (a service that his priesthood would presumably have given him the right to exercise) has been taken by Webb to mean that John did not do so because of his anti-Temple stance.<sup>487</sup> But B. Chilton has shown that ordinary priests, in any case, provided Temple service only occasionally.<sup>488</sup> Thus, according to Chilton, to maintain that John, through his ministry of baptism, challenged the efficacy of the Temple ritual of sacrificial forgiveness of sin creates "a supposed dualism between moral and cultic atonement which simply has no place in critical discussion of early Judaism".<sup>489</sup>

In conclusion, the fact that John the Baptist purified his converts by immersion would not have made him anti-Temple and anti-Jerusalem priesthood. Indeed, John was not in any way unique in practicing immersion as a way of ritual purification. In the first place, all baptist movements carried out rituals of purification – a purification by water prescribed in the Torah. In the second place, issues to do with ritual purification were very important to the Pharisees, and later to the Rabbis, but they did not connect them with forgiveness of sin or with national reconstitution. There is nothing in the Gospels (or in any other sources we are aware of) that connects purification rituals with anti-Temple sentiments or practice. Immersion was never a substitute for Temple sacrifice.<sup>490</sup> The only substitute for sacrifice in the Temple that we are aware of is the one stated in the Community Rule of Qumran: substitution for the Temple sacrifice could be made through individual members of the community

<sup>486</sup> See the further development of Taylor's argument in *The Immerser*, 30-32.

<sup>487</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 193.

<sup>488</sup> See B.D. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospel*, 20-26.

<sup>489</sup> B.D. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospel*, 21.

<sup>490</sup> So J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 31.

doing good works to effect atonement (1QS IX.2-6). This substitution<sup>491</sup> was necessitated by the Qumran community's having publicly professed their break with the Temple and its priesthood in Jerusalem.

#### **7.4 *The Disciples Who Knew Only the Baptism of John***

What were the geographical boundaries of John's influence? In Acts 18:25 we are told that Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt, "knew only the baptism of John", while in Acts 19:1-7 Paul encounters in Ephesus twelve "disciples" who had received the baptism of John. It would appear from these two texts that John's baptism was known from North Africa (the southernmost region of the Roman Empire), through Palestine and possibly the westernmost region of Arabia as far as the eastern shore of the Jordan, to Ephesus (towards the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire). It appears therefore that John's influence was geographically quite extensive.

It is also to be noted that, during their proclamation and evangelization, Peter and Paul make brief references to the preaching of John the Baptist in the different cities they visit, without any prior introduction of John or any further explanation about him to their audiences, which seems to be an indication that John's name was already so well-known to their hearers that it was not necessary to introduce him to them. Peter recalls the preaching of John the Baptist in Jerusalem (Acts 1:22; 11:16), in Caesarea (Acts 10:37). Paul, in his turn, recalls John's ministry in Antioch of Pisidia (Luke 13:25-25). By referring to these different towns and geographical locations the author of Luke-Acts wants to show the impressive extent of John's influence.

There are various striking elements in the two passages – Acts 18:25 and 19:1-7 – not least among which is the fact that the author of Luke-Acts calls the twelve men in Ephesus "disciples". Since it is clear that these people were not Christians – they apparently did not know about Jesus and had definitely never heard there was a Holy Spirit<sup>492</sup> – the term "disciples" is applied to them as it is used for the followers of John

<sup>491</sup> In any case, the Jews in the Diaspora *de facto* lived a life of a geographical "break" with the Temple, and for these Jews (for whom pilgrimage to the Temple was a once-in-a-lifetime event), substitution for Temple sacrifice was the normal method of observing the requirements of the Law. This led to a situation whereby the Temple cult was relegated to secondary importance while the Temple nonetheless continued to maintain its relevance and exalted religious and national significance.

<sup>492</sup> See J.E. Taylor (*The Immerser*) for a contrary view: "As 'believers' in Lucan terminology, they must have recognized Jesus as Messiah, and this indicates that they were part of the Christian

(Luke 5:33; 7:18, 19; 11:2). It seems therefore that the author of Luke-Acts intends to indicate that these men were disciples of John the Baptist.<sup>493</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer refers to these disciples as "Johannine Christians" on the basis of their having received first John's baptism and later the Christian baptism through which the Holy Spirit is received.<sup>494</sup> R.C. Tannehill says that the narrative of Acts 18:25 and 19:1-7 "shows the continuing effect of John's work...John's heritage is still influential, and it still has great value",<sup>495</sup> while Fitzmyer describes the coming down of the Holy Spirit upon the twelve disciples after their (re)baptism as "the Pentecost of Johannine Christians".<sup>496</sup> F.F. Bruce has noted that "This is the only instance of rebaptism expressly attested in the NT",<sup>497</sup> while L.T. Johnson says the pericope Acts 19:1-7 "has the literary function of enabling a final distinction between John and Jesus".<sup>498</sup>

Acts 19:1-7 supports John's proclamation of a baptism by the Holy Spirit after his own (Luke 3:16). We will not speculate on the source of the instruction of the twelve disciples about John and his baptism ministry, heeding F.F. Bruce's wise advice: "how and where they received instruction must be a matter of speculation",<sup>499</sup> even though J.E. Taylor suggests they may have been instructed and baptized by Apollos in Ephesus.<sup>500</sup>

Concerning Apollos, (Acts 18:1-4), it is striking that John's baptism led him to teach about Jesus. Apparently Apollos had accepted John's proclamation of a 'coming one' (Luke 3:16) and saw in Jesus the fulfillment of that proclamation. That, however, seems not to have been the case with the twelve disciples of Ephesus.

### 7.5 Conclusion

John the Baptist was a child of his time, living in a complex world marked by the parallel existence of various Judaisms that comprised an equally diverse number of

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community at Ephesus, not a separate group of hypothetical 'Baptists'" (:73). However, Taylor offers no explanation for the disciples' ignorance of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>493</sup> So also C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 188.

<sup>494</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 643. See also on page 637.

<sup>495</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2, 233 and 234.

<sup>496</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2, 644.

<sup>497</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 407.

<sup>498</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1992, 337.

<sup>499</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 406.

<sup>500</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 73.

liberationist and eschatological movements. Because of the particular role assigned to him by the author of Luke-Acts, John is shown as being at the centre of various expectations. Various other traditions arose around John and these are reflected in how John the Baptist is treated in the canonical Gospels, in extra-canonical literature, as well as in the work of Flavius Josephus. By means of social description we have been able to see how the author of Luke-Acts has succeeded in creating a world in which John the Baptist makes 'sense', and it is from this background that we now turn to John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke's writings. The approach to John's contextual background by means of social description is but a first step towards understanding the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts. In the following section we will attempt a narrative-theological analysis of the major texts in Luke-Acts which deal with John the Baptist.



### PART THREE

#### THE ROLE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN LUKE-ACTS

#### 8. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

##### 8.1 Introduction

The investigation of the function of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts raises a number of related questions, such as, for example: (1) What are our primary sources on Luke-Acts in general, and on John the Baptist in particular? (2) How reliable are those sources? (3) What was the context of John the Baptist in so far as we might be able to reconstruct this from the sources known to us? (4) Was John the Baptist a solitary idealist or visionary of his time, or was he perhaps part of a wider 'movement' or social phenomenon? (5) Of what precise nature was the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth? R.L. Webb raises a whole lot more questions<sup>501</sup> that it is necessary to take into consideration if we are to understand Luke-Acts' John the Baptist. Webb admits that he does not attempt to answer all the questions he raises – for example he chooses to "set aside" the question of the relationship between John and Jesus.

Commentators have long noted the supposed inferiority of John in respect of Jesus. In their perception of this relationship in terms of 'servant-and-master', commentators base themselves on what the evangelists report John as saying about himself:<sup>502</sup>

<sup>501</sup> Thus, according to Webb, (*John the Baptizer and Prophet*): "Questions which deserve examination include: Was Jesus actually a disciple of John, and if so, what did this involve? Did Jesus participate in John's ministry? To what extent was Jesus' ministry a continuation of John's ministry, a development of it, a rejection of it, or a combination of these? What influences did John possibly have upon Jesus' ministry? To what extent did the people and the religious authorities perceive a relationship between Jesus' ministry and that of John?" (:23).

<sup>502</sup> The words attributed to John the Baptist have been *italicized* for easier identification.

<b>MARK</b> <b>(1:7-8)</b>	<b>MATTHEW</b> <b>(3:11-15)</b>	<b>LUKE</b> <b>(3:15-16)</b>	<b>JOHN</b> <b>(1:23-34)</b>
<p><i>"After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water: but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."</i></p>	<p><i>"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."</i></p> <p>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying:</p> <p><i>"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"</i> But Jesus answered him, <i>"Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."</i></p> <p>Then [John] consented.</p>	<p>As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all:</p> <p><i>"I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."</i></p>	<p>[John] said, <i>"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said....I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie...Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.'...I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."</i></p>

Admittedly, these statements attributed to John are hard not to acknowledge in support of John's inferiority in comparison to Jesus; but is this John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke-Acts? While some scholars have long maintained that Christianity was a product of Paul,<sup>503</sup> there are many who, as we have noted, believe that Jesus' ministry was a continuation of that of John the Baptist, and that Jesus' message to the people of his time as well as the teaching that was later spread in his name "to the ends of the world" (Acts 1:8) by his followers were based, in their original form, along the contours of the earlier teaching of John the Baptist. Jesus is seen to have been more of a faithful disciple than an innovative teacher, and is said to

<sup>503</sup> For example, C. Marksches, *Between Two Worlds: Structures of Earliest Christianity*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1999, 4-5.

have added substantially little that was not already to be found in John's earlier proclamation, specifically with regard to repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and, generally, being in a state of ready expectation of God's imminent judgment. Even the ideal of the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven", a concept or rather messianic expectation that, though common in some form to the people of Jesus' time, was given by him a unique interpretation, is said to have originated from the hope in an ideal society that informed the hopes behind the proclamation of John the Baptist.

We noted above how the majority of scholars have rarely studied John the Baptist apart from the history of Jesus, and also how it has often been argued, therefore, that for a reconstruction of the life of John the Baptist, the scholar must of necessity have recourse to the sources that deal with the historical Jesus. This approach has the unfortunate tendency of significantly narrowing down the scope of materials available to the scholar for, notwithstanding his tremendous significance in the history of humanity in the last two millennia, the fact remains that the data for a reliable historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus is notoriously scarce, and such of it as does exist is just as notoriously unreliable, in addition to often being quite contradictory.<sup>504</sup> Scholars like A. Schweitzer have long recognized the difficulties inherent in any scientific attempt at a reconstruction of the life of Jesus, a difficulty compounded by the subjectivity of the person attempting the reconstruction.<sup>505</sup> Bultmann held an even more pessimistic view of the possibility of ever getting back to Jesus because of the extensive theological, or kerygmatic, nature of the Gospel traditions.<sup>506</sup> The scholars of the *Jesus Seminar*, notwithstanding the democratic

<sup>504</sup> One has only to look at the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) to see how contradictory some elements relating to the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus are, and not just in relatively insignificant differences in detail, but also in major events that later shaped the foundational core of Christian belief (for example, the Resurrection)

<sup>505</sup> Very early on in his own quest for the historical Jesus Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, New York, Macmillan, 1968) was not blind to the predominantly self-reflective quality, both cultural and personal, that characterized the study of Jesus when he said, "But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a life of Jesus" (:4).

<sup>506</sup> Bultmann's work coincided with the so-called "No Quest" period from 1921-1953, when, after almost two hundred years of intermittent studies, scholarly interest in the historical life of Jesus initiated by Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), was at its lowest level. The period in which Bultmann worked was more interested in unravelling the theological traditions of the Gospels, and operated under the assumption that retrieving the historical Jesus was both not possible and not necessary. On the one hand, it was thought to be not possible because of the thick and practically

process<sup>507</sup> by which they seek, through various tools such as historical criticism, literary criticism, social and other criticisms, to establish the 'Historical Jesus', are not always in unanimous agreement with regard to the theories and methodologies to be adopted in this quest. Some, like Lüdemann, while still maintaining a link with the *Jesus Seminar*, have struck a direction separate from that of the mainstream *Seminar* in search of a different methodological approach. Even the staunchest adherents of the *Seminar* admit that the real Jesus is fundamentally unattainable. Hal Childs, in his unsympathetic and very critical assessment of the positions held by the members of the *Seminar* as well as their methodology, has this to say about the general position of the *Seminar*:

Meier admits the real Jesus is fundamentally unattainable, but states that the primary characteristic of the constructed "historical Jesus" is its radical historicity and "refusal to be held fast by any given school of thought." Funk calls the real Jesus a "vagabond king" and states, "The real Jesus escapes now and again from the scriptural and creedal prisons in which we entomb him."<sup>508</sup>

The "vagabond king" is therefore mercurial, thwarting any attempt at encasing him in any particular ideological moulds. Implicit in all this is the logical conclusion that the historical Jesus, if he can be identified at all, is a pluriform and multi-faceted being, presenting a portrait that is never (and, indeed, can never be) actually complete. It is

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impermeable layers of centuries of tendentious theological interpretation, while, on the other hand, it was considered not necessary because the Christian faith had never been based on the changeable and unreliable results of historical research. Bultmann thus sought to re-interpret the basic message of the Gospels by 'demythologizing' the ancient kerygma and the person behind it (Jesus of Nazareth).

Concerning the different phases of the quest for the historical Jesus, which are believed to cover three distinctive periods, namely 1778 (described as the "Old Quest" – initiated by H.S. Reimarus), 1953 (the "New Quest" – initiated by E. Käsemann), and the 1980's (the "Third Quest" – acknowledged by N.T. Wright), see Childs' concise description in H. Childs, *The Myth of the Historical Jesus and the Evolution of Consciousness*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000, 22-27.

<sup>507</sup> Employing what has become its distinctive methodological feature, the *Jesus Seminar* (plus-minus two thousand members) adopted the somewhat irregular expedient of voting to establish consensus (by way of magnitude or majority) in analyzing all the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in all the ancient sources up to about 300 C.E. To establish whether consensus existed among the members (or majority of members) of the *Seminar*, coloured beads were used for voting purposes. R.W. Funk, the founder of the *Jesus Seminar*, describes the two ways in which the method functioned, one for the words attributed to Jesus, and the other for the acts attributed to him: "For the words of Jesus, the seminar adopted the following brief definitions of the four colors: Red – Jesus said it or something very close to it. Pink – Jesus probably said something like it, although his words have suffered in transmission. Gray – these are not his words, but the ideas are close to his own. Black – Jesus did not say it; the words represent the Christian community or a later point of view.

For the acts of Jesus, the colors indicate: Red – the report is historically reliable. Pink – the report is probably reliable. Gray – the report is possible but unreliable; it lacks supporting evidence. Black – the report is improbable; it is not congruent with verifiable evidence, and it may well be fictive". See R.W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, 8.

<sup>508</sup> H. Childs, *The Myth of the Historical Jesus*, 239.



no wonder, therefore, that some scholars are now beginning to question what is increasingly being seen as a futile exercise, namely the attempt at recovering the historical Jesus, as if this were possible in our "contemporary post-foundational world".<sup>509</sup>

If serious problems are encountered in attempts at reconstructing a universally acceptable 'Historical Jesus', they are doubly compounded in the parallel search for the historical John the Baptist. The point raised above concerning what scholars see as the growing futility of attempts at recovering the 'one true Jesus', applies, in any case, just as much to John the Baptist. However, be that as it may, we do encounter in both canonical and extra-canonical texts the figure of a person by the name of John the Baptist. In some of the literature he is a character quickly encountered, and just as quickly lost sight of and forgotten. In other writings, however, he is a figure of more than just passing interest; a key character without whom the story of Jesus would hardly be conceivable. We have noted our own conviction that in order to make sense of Jesus, it is necessary first of all to make sense of John the Baptist.

In comparison with the story of Jesus of Nazareth, which is at the centre of the canonical New Testament writings and of the even larger body of extra-canonical texts, when it comes to John the Baptist we have, at least in the current state of

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<sup>509</sup> The study by Hal Childs opens up various methodological trajectories, especially from the psychological and phenomenological perspectives, which the quest for the historical Jesus needs to follow if it is not to remain in the mythical realm. Childs argues that "the historical critical awareness of the mythic nature of history will help the historian accept the role of archetypal-subjectivity, that is, imagination and projection, in the narrative creation of history". This approach, according to Childs, should lead the questers for the historical Jesus to realize that "multiple images of the historical Jesus" will emerge, but that these should not be seen as something to be overcome or fixed, but rather that "multiple historical-Jesus-images are an unavoidable necessity in the light of the narrative and mythic essence of history" (*The Myth of the Historical Jesus*, 258-259). In other words, Childs appears to be suggesting that there is no such thing as a single, all-embracing historical Jesus, but that whatever idea one may have of the historical Jesus, it will be the product of the subjective creativity and projection of the historian. Space is thus open for any number of concepts of the historical Jesus according to the methodology used, and Childs proposes a "quest for the historical Jesus that combines phenomenological and hermeneutic analytical psychology with a historical criticism that is aware of history as myth...that is, that both history and memory are creative constructions having a great deal to do with the value-creating and significance-power of emotion" (*The Myth of the Historical Jesus*, 258). The methodology proposed by Childs "participates in the contemporary transition toward a postfoundational world and suggests that the traditional aim to which the historical critical method has been put by the quest for the historical Jesus, that of recovering the one true Jesus, is *not warranted* [our emphasis] in the light of the understanding that history is myth, i.e., narrative" (*The Myth of the Historical Jesus*, 258).



## 8.2 John the Baptist in the New Testament

For the Christian, the New Testament is the primary *locus* for an encounter with John the Baptist. All four Gospels as well as the Acts of the Apostles mention him to a greater or lesser extent. While points of particular emphasis may differ, the general outlines of John's life, especially as they are presented in Luke-Acts, may be briefly sketched along the following lines, though to be sure there are some elements not found in all the Gospels:

- (a) John was born miraculously of a priestly family.
- (b) John lived an ascetic life in the wilderness.
- (c) The primary activities of John are indicated as being a preacher and a baptizer.
- (d) Jesus is presented as one of the people baptized by John.
- (e) John had a group of disciples who followed his teachings and apparently continued his mandate long after he had been martyred (Acts 19).
- (e) John the Baptist was executed during the reign of Herod.<sup>513</sup>

These are the bare outlines of John's life and activity which the reader of the New Testament is initially presented with. The rest of the narratives then flesh up the skeleton and shape John according to the purposes of specific Gospel authors, who generally present him as being second only to Jesus in importance. Though some have argued that this exalted position is to be accorded to Paul;<sup>514</sup> our own position is that John the Baptist and Jesus are the main protagonists of Luke-Acts. What follows is not intended to be a detailed profile of John the Baptist in the canonical Gospels, but is meant to indicate trajectories or tendencies in these sources that may help in placing in perspective the John the Baptist that is portrayed in Luke-Acts.

<sup>513</sup> See further R.L. Webb's detailed listing of the traditions concerning John the Baptist in early Christian Gospels: *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 47-77.

<sup>514</sup> R. Brown, for example, considers Paul to be the "most influential figure in the history of Christianity", next to Jesus. See R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York, Doubleday, 1997, 422.

### 8.2.1 John the Baptist in Mark<sup>515</sup>

#### 8.2.1.1 An Initial Encounter with John the Baptist

If the foundational hypothesis of the 'Two-Source Theory' (Mark and Q) for the study of the relationship between the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke is accepted,<sup>516</sup> then the New Testament reader's initial encounter with John is in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel if we accept the priority of Mark. Otherwise we would have to say the average reader of the New Testament first encounters John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel according to the current ordering of most canonical versions of the New Testament. Though voices have been raised in support of contrary positions,<sup>517</sup> we will assume the priority of Mark throughout this study as we believe that in the present state of research this hypothesis best explains the *concordia discors* between the Synoptic Gospels.

Mark tells us that, in fulfillment of the prophets,<sup>518</sup> Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ("John, the baptizing one"<sup>519</sup>) appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Four attributes are immediately associated with John right from the start: (1) the wilderness (Mark 1:3), (2) baptizing activity (Mark 1:4), (3) his role being interpreted in terms of Malachi, Exodus, and Isaiah (Mark 1:6), and (4) a messianic proclamation of 'the coming one', mightier than he (Mark 1:7).

Mark sees in John the eschatological Elijah, whom a merciful God had promised to send as a baptizing prophet in preparation for God's definitive visitation and

<sup>515</sup> For more discussion of Mark's portrayal of John the Baptist the reader is referred to the following authors, among others: W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1969, 30-53; W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968, 1-17; E.F. Lupieri, *Giovanni Battista nelle tradizioni sinottiche*, Brescia, Paideia Editrice, 1988, 21-52; J. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer: Interpretation-Geschichte-Wirkungsgeschichte*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1989, 4-38; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 51-55.

<sup>516</sup> Though the 'Two-Source Hypothesis' is not without its problems, we accept that, in the present time, it remains the most plausible explanation for the striking differences and similarities between the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>517</sup> One thinks here, for example, of W.R. Farmer, who argues for the priority of Matthew (*The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1964), and of J.A.T. Robinson, who argues for the priority of John (*The Priority of John*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1985).

<sup>518</sup> Though Mark specifically mentions the prophet Isaiah, other ancient textual traditions read 'τοῖς προφήταις'. This is not an implausible tradition, since Mark does make reference to a number of other prophets in relation to John the Baptist, among them Micah and Malachi.

<sup>519</sup> Our translation.

redemption of his people.<sup>520</sup> In addition to this profile, we may note the following features in Mark's presentation of John:

### 8.2.1.2 *John in the Wilderness*

#### 8.2.1.2.1 *The Wilderness*

Scholars have long noted the significance of the wilderness as the location for John's activities. Attention is particularly drawn to the symbolic meaning of 'wilderness' as well as to the associations the wilderness had in the thought of the people of John's time.<sup>521</sup> The wilderness represented, among other things, a place of retreat and safety: for example it was in the wilderness that David sought refuge when he ran away from Absalom's murderous intentions (I Sam. 24:1); it was to the wilderness that eschatological and messianic movements were attracted (for example the sectarians of Qumran) because of a belief based on Hosea 2:14 (also Hosea 12:9) that the final eschatological salvation of Israel would begin in the wilderness, and that the messiah would come from there.<sup>522</sup> In the words of H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann,

...[the wilderness] has symbolic meaning; the wilderness time is Israel's uncorrupted time, the time of Moses, of the covenant, of the giving of the law. Hence the Qumran community also moved into the wilderness because Israel's eschatological redemption was to come to pass there (cf. Hos. 2:14ff).<sup>523</sup>

In keeping with the fact that John resided in the wilderness, his diet was of locusts and wild honey, while his clothing was of camel's hair, with a leather girdle round his waist. A commentator like Lupieri draws our attention to the fact that in eating grasshoppers, John was observing the Levitical laws of purity concerning food, since grasshoppers were the only insects that a pious Jew was permitted to eat.<sup>524</sup> The reference to 'wild' honey, likewise, shows its purity as it has not come into contact with human beings. John thus eats only what is produced by nature, avoiding food

<sup>520</sup> Mal. 3:1; Is. 40:3. See also Ex. 23:20.

<sup>521</sup> For a brief discussion of which see C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959, 41-42, and H.B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, London, MacMillan and Co., 1908, 3).

<sup>522</sup> See C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 41-42, and B.M.F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, 96.

<sup>523</sup> H. Conzelmann & A. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of N.T. Exegesis*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1992, 300.

<sup>524</sup> See, for example, Lev. 11:21-22, in which the following directive is given to the Israelites in the wilderness: "Among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those which have legs above their feet, with which to leap on the earth. Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind".

prepared by human hands. In this way, he avoids any possible contamination from humans. Few scholars question the historical probability of this Marcan tradition concerning John since the details concerning both the wilderness, the strange dress and diet are clearly rooted in a Palestinian background.<sup>525</sup>

John's clothing, like his diet, was in keeping with his ascetic wilderness existence. However, there is a significance in John's garb that is symbolic beyond the fact of its simply being appropriate to a desert dweller. John clearly patterned himself after Elijah. While the hairy garment is characteristic of a prophet generally (see Zech. 13:4), his total outfit is identical to that of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). When this is taken together with the quotation in Mk. 1:2 (Καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἡσαΐα τῷ προφῆτῃ· ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου - As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face..."), it becomes clear that in Mark's gospel John is presented as the long-awaited prophet Elijah.

#### 8.2.1.2.2 *The River Jordan*

Like the wilderness, the river Jordan is pregnant with symbolic meanings. B.M.F. van Iersel has captured these well:

the Jordan was a most appropriate place for a rite of passage like baptism. The river is a place full of memories of Israel's past. In Joshua 3-4 an event takes place at the Jordan which is a 'passage' in the literal sense of the word. The passing of the river by the Israelites led by the ark of the covenant is presented as a sacred ritual...Other events around and in the Jordan have left lasting memories. With his mantle Elijah made a dry path through the Jordan for Elisha and himself, and after he was taken up to heaven on the other side, Elisha used the mantle the prophet had left behind to effect a dry return (2 Kgs 2)...Naaman the Syrian was healed because on the advice of Elisha he immersed himself seven times in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5). Immersing oneself in the Jordan means participating in the major events of Israel's past, each of which in its own way marked a new beginning. The first marked a new beginning for the people of Israel, the second for Elisha, and the third for the pagan Naaman.<sup>526</sup>

<sup>525</sup> According to Josephus, John was not unique in thus separating himself from his impure contemporaries by leading an ascetic life in the wilderness. Apparently, one Bannous held ideas and performed practices analogous to those of John (*Vita* 2,10f). And, of course, the Essenes separated themselves from mainstream Judaism, the better to observe the law and to maintain as strictly as possible the demands of ritual purity.

<sup>526</sup> B.M.F. van Iersel, *Mark*, 96-97.

### 8.2.1.3 John and the Baptism of Repentance

The most notable thing about John was also the most characteristic element of his preaching, and this is noted likewise by all the evangelists as well as by Josephus, namely that John was a preacher and a baptizer. Scholars have noted that the ritual washing laid down by the law in the Old Testament<sup>527</sup> formed the basis for John's ministry of baptizing. More closely, however, John's baptism has been noted to be similar to proselyte baptism which was a fully established practice in his time. This involved the baptism of converts to Judaism who, in addition to circumcision, were required, by immersion in flowing water, to undergo a series of ritual ablutions that incorporated them into the people of God. Commenting on John's baptism, C.E.B. Cranfield notes that

If [the] view that John's baptism was derived from proselyte-baptism is granted, then it follows that the implication of his baptism was that Jews did not have a right to membership in the people of God by the mere fact that they were Jews (cf. Mt. iii.9, Lk. iii.8): by their sins they had become as Gentiles and now they needed as radical a repentance as did Gentiles, if they were to have any part in God's salvation. John was seeking to awaken his compatriots out of their false sense of security.<sup>528</sup>

John preached a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). The phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν ('for the forgiveness of sins') appears to be an innovation that John introduces into the customary practice of Jewish purificatory ablutions, about which see the section on 'John's Baptism' below. John baptized in the Jordan (Mark 1:9). In this simple statement, Mark gives us some rather interesting though very much contested insight into the person of John the Baptist, such as John may have at some stage broken with the established rituals of the priesthood in Jerusalem: that the Rabbis did not think the water of the river Jordan (in particular) was suitable for purification, because of what was seen as its impure nature because the river was in contact with pagan territories, especially along most of its eastern bank. For John, however, the river is a natural source of running water; therefore baptizing in it was analogical to eating wild honey and grasshoppers.

Another possible indication that John had broken with official Temple practice in Jerusalem appears to be the fact that "there went out to him all the country of Judea,

<sup>527</sup> For example in Leviticus 15:5,8,13,16.

<sup>528</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 43.



and all the people of Jerusalem" (καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες – Mark 1:5). John's activity was thus not within Judea itself, and Mark confirms this by telling us later that John was arrested and subsequently executed by Herod Antipas who, under Roman administration, did not have the jurisdiction to exercise such power in Judea. Because of this detail, we can accept the position of most scholars that John was active in the region of Perea.<sup>529</sup>

Briefly, then, the Marcan tradition that we have outlined above, of John baptizing in the Jordan, is almost certainly a historical fact in its broader and more general aspects, and is accepted by most scholars as such.<sup>530</sup> Because it would take us beyond our present scope, attention to detail must be left, for now, in the capable hands of exegetes and linguistic analysts.<sup>531</sup>

<sup>529</sup> Some scholars make the observation that for Mark, who "has no clear geographical ideas about Palestine" to make such an "internal accord" (that is to say, his correct connection between Judea, the desert, and John's arrest and execution by Herod who had no administrative authority in Judea) is significant for situating with certainty the area of John's operations, namely Perea. This location is further borne out by Josephus who writes that John the Baptist was executed in the fortress of Machaerus (*Ant.* XVIII). Thus, for example, Lupieri, "John the Baptist", 441. Concerning Mark's apparent ignorance of the geography of Palestine, P. Parker observes that "the Second Evangelist appears woefully uninformed about Jesus' land. 'In the wilderness,' declares Mark 1:13, Jesus 'was with the wild beasts.' The only *beasts* thereabouts were a few goats!...Only Mark 6:21 says that Antipas' birthday party was for 'the chief men of Galilee.' Yet (6:27) Antipas had the Baptist beheaded and his head brought in to the party. So the festivities were still in progress. Therefore they must have been at Machaerus in Perea – a good 100 miles from Antipas's Galilean seat. Did 'the chief men of Galilee' walk or ride their beasts all that way to a birthday party? Or did the Second Evangelist simply have no idea how far it was from Tiberias to John's prison?". After giving a string of other impossible geographical inconsistencies in Mark's Gospel, Parker concludes that there are "just too many geographical absurdities. Our author [Mark] cannot have been told much about Palestine, still less ever have seen the country" itself, ("A Second Look At *The Gospel Before Mark*", JBL 100 [1981], 397-398). It is probably not unreasonable to assume that Mark is therefore not on very firm ground when he speaks about John the Baptist. The striking geographical ignorance, the confusion over the identity of Jesus as John *redivivus*, John's lack of recognition of Jesus when the latter comes to him for baptism, the implication (admittedly contested by some scholars) that John was not part of Jesus' epiphany after baptism: all these, taken together, appear to add up to an intriguing, yet not altogether improbable conclusion, namely that the questions and uncertainties that Mark has placed in the mouths of his characters would in fact appear to be the questions and uncertainties of Mark himself. It is therefore not surprising that Mark glosses over the materials concerning John the Baptist and rushes on instead to a tradition that he is apparently more familiar with, namely the tradition concerning Jesus of Nazareth. This may vindicate Lupieri's position that Mark is not aware of any firm tradition that brings John the Baptist and Jesus together.

<sup>530</sup> Among them, Mann, *Mark*, 198; Lupieri, "John the Baptist", 439; Gundry, *Mark*, 52, and others.

<sup>531</sup> We refer the reader to some excellent commentaries and other works such as H.B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St Mark*; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*; A. Jones, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1963; R.H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993; B.M.F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*.

#### 8.2.1. 4 John's Messianic Proclamation

According to Mark, John is, in fulfillment of the prophets, a messianic proclaimer of one who is mightier than he, for whom he has been sent ahead to prepare the way (1:2, 7-8). In this section, as in the whole opening chapter, if not indeed in all the pericopae that deal with John,<sup>532</sup> Mark tells us something about him only in order to explain the figure of Jesus or the relationship between the two.<sup>533</sup> On the basis of some Old Testament texts,<sup>534</sup> Mark identifies John with Elijah, in so doing placing John in the long line of prophets. Indeed, in all the Gospels John is, in some way, identified with Elijah.<sup>535</sup> Scholars have attempted to explain why this is so by noting that it was the popular belief of the time that before the Messiah came to bring final deliverance and victory to Israel, Elijah would first return to earth as Yahweh's envoy, as a precursor of *Yahweh*, and not of a messiah.<sup>536</sup> While in Old Testament terms the messenger who, according to Malachi 3:1-3 (see also 3:23; 4:5-6), was to precede Yahweh's final judgment was interpreted as Elijah, the Christian tradition, instead, interpreted John as Jesus' forerunner, and thus recognized in him the returned Elijah (9:11-13; Matthew 11:14).

John's task is to proclaim, and thus prepare for a 'mightier one' (Mark 1:7), but in Mark there is no indication that John identifies this 'mightier one' specifically with Jesus; John only knows that he is not worthy to stoop down to untie the sandals of whoever he is preparing the way for. It is therefore not surprising that when Jesus does come for baptism, John does not recognize him and simply takes him as one of the crowd.<sup>537</sup>

<sup>532</sup> The Gospel of Mark contains nine pericopae referring to John the Baptist: Mark 1:2-6; 1:7-8; 1:9-11; 1:14; 2:18-22; 6:14-29; 8:27-30; 9:9-13; 11:27-33.

<sup>533</sup> E.F. Lupieri, "John the Baptist: The First Monk: A Contribution to the History of the Figure of John the Baptist in the Early Monastic World" in *Monasticism: A Historical Overview*, 1984, 432; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 51.

<sup>534</sup> Mark applies to John the following Old Testament texts that talk of a merciful God sending a baptizing prophet similar to Elijah: Malachi 3:3 (Exodus 23:20); Isaiah 40:3.

<sup>535</sup> Matthew, for example, has Jesus tell his disciples, quite explicitly, after the transfiguration, that John the Baptist was Elijah (Matthew 17:13). While Luke appears to be more cautious regarding a wholesale identification of John the Baptist with Elijah, he nonetheless reports that before John's birth it was foretold that John would "go in the power and spirit of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).

<sup>536</sup> See, for example, J. Marsh, *Saint John*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1968, 115-116; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971, 89-90.

<sup>537</sup> We would, however, be cautious with Lupieri's assertion, that "Mark, in fact, knows no tradition about any direct contact of John with Jesus" ("John the Baptist", 439). While it may not be explicitly stated in the text, it is nonetheless difficult to imagine that there would absolutely have been no physical contact of some sort between the baptizer and the penitent in the process of the ritual itself.

### 8.2.1.5 John and Jesus

Jesus' baptism by John is very simply stated, almost in passing (Mark 1:9), and yet there is a striking feature about it that an inattentive reader might easily miss. There is no indication that John was *aware* that he was actually baptizing Jesus as someone special. The baptism was an important moment for Jesus (therefore he goes all the way to Peraea from Galilee to receive it), but not for John who, at least according to Mark, is not aware of the significance of the moment. The epiphany at Mark 1:10 appears to be a private experience of Jesus,<sup>538</sup> *after* the baptism and *after* he had come out of the water. For John, therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that at the time that Jesus came to him to be baptized, Jesus would have appeared to him just like any of the many young men who came to him for the ritual. Clearly the baptism *per se* is not at the centre of Mark's interest at this stage, and neither is it even on John himself. Rather, at this point Mark makes a dramatic shift to an emphasis on Jesus, because henceforth attention shifts to the ministry of Jesus, beginning with his fasting and temptation in the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:13).

Regarding Mark's description of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, specifically in Mark 1:7-8, the use of the Greek word κύψας ('stooping down') is taken by some scholars<sup>539</sup> as Mark's desire to emphasize John's subordinate position in respect to that of Jesus. In due course, after the arrest of John, the earlier success of John with the multitudes (Mark 1:5) becomes that of Jesus, who even surpasses John in that he is able to perform a series of miracles (Mark 1:15-45). Whereas John had administered a baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4), it is now Jesus who administers the forgiveness of sins, and not by any external or physical sign (such as baptism), but by the power of his word alone (Mark 2:5). In Mark, the era of John the Baptist is a short one, and Jesus completely replaces him and very quickly assumes centre-stage. But Mark himself has already prepared the reader for this dramatic

<sup>538</sup> The subject of the verb εἶδεν ("he saw") refers to Jesus, agreeing as it does with the singular participial phrase ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος ("coming up out of the water"). The same point is acknowledged by W. Harrington, *Mark*, Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1979, 6; Lupieri, "John the Baptist", 433, 439; Gundry, *Mark*, 48; Iersel, *Mark*, 98. For a contrary position, see Lagrange, *Evangelie Selon Saint Marc*, 10. With reference to the epiphany itself, Taylor (*The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 160) holds that "It is difficult to decide whether Mark means to describe a vision or objective phenomena. Probably the latter is meant, but he does not suggest that the rending of the heavens was visible to others". So, even in his doubt, Taylor does appear to accede the benefit of the doubt to the strong probability that John the Baptist may not have been part of the experience.

<sup>539</sup> For example, E.F. Lupieri, "John the Baptist", 436.

change by having John say quite early on in the Gospel that whereas he baptized with water, the one coming after him would baptize ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ ("in the Holy Spirit" – Mark 1:8), and that he was unworthy to untie the thongs of his sandals (Mark 1:7), that is to say, someone before whom, or in comparison to whom John assumes a position similar to that of a slave.

A further relationship between John and Jesus is seen in the various parallels between their lives, suffering, and death.<sup>540</sup> Many people, including Herod and, more strikingly, Jesus' disciples, saw in Jesus John the Baptist risen from the dead. Indeed, this appears to have been a popular view. For example, the Synoptics agree on the point that before Peter's confession (Mark 8:28 and parallel), the disciples reported to Jesus that many held him to be John the Baptist. This is possibly because, in the eyes of the people, John and Jesus apparently possessed the same powers: "Some said, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in [Jesus]'" (Mark 6:14).

It is, however, important to note that some scholars have for some time questioned whether John, indeed, expected a messiah mightier than he, or whether John did not, in fact, see *himself* fulfilling the role of this long-awaited figure. This question is raised by an exegesis of Mark 1:2-4 that takes the possessive personal pronoun "μου" (that is to say, *Yahweh's* messenger) as pointing to John. He, argue the proponents of this interpretation, is the messenger Yahweh is speaking of sending:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight..." John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The interpretation of this pericope that sees John as the one who prepares the way for God (and not for Jesus) appears to be supported by verse 4 which, by its rather abrupt introduction of John the Baptist into the narrative (without any prior reference to him by name), is seen as explicating the identity of the impersonal "messenger" of verse 2. John is clearly the messenger of Yahweh who exhorts people to "prepare the way

<sup>540</sup> E.F. Lupieri: "John the Baptist", 433.



of the Lord" (the way of Yahweh),<sup>541</sup> through undergoing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Indeed it would appear that, at least in one of the Marcan traditions (perhaps the earliest), John understood himself to be, and was looked upon by the crowds as being possibly one of the awaited messiahs.<sup>542</sup> His activity, and the tone of his proclamation, was 'messianic' in a way that did not seem to leave room for the necessity of another person greater than he. Some of the scholars who hold this position are of the opinion that Mark's reference (through the mouth of John) to a 'mightier one' was a later re-interpretation which saw the mightier one not as Yahweh but as Jesus. Other scholars believe that the 'mightier one' was a later addition to the earliest tradition; an addition that was made as a result of the later polemic between the followers of Jesus and the followers of John the Baptist. As B.M.F. van Iersel notes: "It is easy to imagine that Christians enjoyed quoting this declaration in discussion with the followers of John the Baptist (cf. Acts 19:1-7)",<sup>543</sup> or, as H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann maintain, "When all of the Gospels (and Q) present John as allied with Jesus, it is clearly understood to be a Christian interpretation. The same intention lies also behind the Scripture citation of Mk 1:2f."<sup>544</sup>

#### 8.2.1.6 John's Imprisonment and Death

The arresting and imprisonment of John (Mark 1:14) is treated in much the same way as John's baptizing of Jesus; cursorily at best. There is no indication of who arrested John, or why, or where. We have to wait until the sixth chapter before the story is taken up again, by which time Jesus' ministry is fully established and the initial importance of John is all but dispensed with. Even though John had himself, in any case, already made reference to someone "mightier" than he coming after him (1:7-8), Jesus underlines John's subordination to him by stating that John was not the "bridegroom", but *he* himself was (Mark 2:18-22):

<sup>541</sup> An interpretation of Mark 1:2-4 in this way makes it easier to understand why, later on (Mark 8:27-29), when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, the answer is readily forthcoming: "John the Baptist". In the public mind, John the Baptist was the expected messiah, hence the public's failure to distinguish between John and Jesus.

<sup>542</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the messianic and eschatological expectation in Judaism was quite diffuse. Various figures were expected, among whom an anointed king with Davidic characteristics was a popular expectation. In Qumran there was even an expectation of a priestly messiah. While it is true that there was nothing remotely kingly about John the Baptist, he certainly did possess, at least in the public view, the characteristics befitting a spiritual/religious messiah.

<sup>543</sup> B.M.F. van Iersel, *Mark*, 97.

<sup>544</sup> H. Conzelmann & A. Lindemann *Interpreting the New Testament*, 300.



Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins."

However, lest the wrong impression be created, Mark does indicate that Jesus did have a sincere reverence for John, witnessed in his going down to him from Galilee, all the way to the region of Peraea, to be baptized by him. In addition, Jesus, in mentioning John during his dispute with the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (Mark 11:27-33), bestows upon him a distinctly respectful memory and a positive judgment:

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me." They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin'?" - they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

#### 8.2.1.7 *The Disciples of John*

The pericope Mark 2:18-22 gives us yet another glimpse of the Marcan picture of John. The reference to οἱ μαθηταὶ Ἰωάννου ("the disciples of John") suggests not just a loose and anonymous band of admirers of John, but an identifiable close group of friends, or close followers and associates. It may not be stretching the imagination too far to think of something along the lines of a 'school' of John the Baptist which, after the death of its master, disappeared from history, for after having buried their decapitated leader (Mark 6:29), Mark speaks no more of "the disciples of John".

This Marcan tradition of John the Baptist having disciples is almost certainly based on historical fact, for it was not uncommon in First Century Palestine for charismatic leaders such as John the Baptist, or Jesus, or the Theudas of Acts 5:36, or the Judas of

## 8.2.2 *John the Baptist in Matthew*<sup>548</sup>

### 8.2.2.1 *Initial Encounter with John the Baptist in Matthew*

In his presentation of John the Baptist, Matthew uses all the information available to him from Mark, his primary source.<sup>549</sup> Matthew does, however, add two units of material unique to him concerning John. The first of these is found at Matthew 11:13-15: "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!" What we have here is an explicit identification of John the Baptist with Elijah, an identification that is, at most, vaguely implicit in 'Q'.<sup>550</sup>

The second unit of material concerning John the Baptist that is unique to Matthew is appended to a parable unique to this Gospel, namely the parable of a father who tells his two sons to go and work in the vineyard. One son refuses, but later repents and goes, while the other son agrees, but does not go (Matthew 21:28-32). Jesus likens the chief priests and elders of the people, with whom he is in debate, to the second son, while he identifies tax collectors and prostitutes with the first son: "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." (Matthew 21:31a). To clarify the point, Jesus adds: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him" (Matthew 21:31b-32). Matthew presents the Jewish leaders as ranged against both John and Jesus, for they reject both. In this way Matthew further develops the parallelism he has established between John the Baptist and Jesus. At

<sup>548</sup> Altogether there are 16 pericopae that contain references to John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel. These are: (1) 3:1-6; (2) 3:7-10; (3) 3:11-12; (4) 3:13-17; (5) 4:12; (6) 9:14-17; (7) 11:2-6; (8) 11:7-11; (9) 11:12-13; (10) 11:14-15; (11) 11:16-19; (12) 14:1-12; (13) 16:13-16; (14) 17:9-13; (15) 21:23-27; (16) 21:28-32. For fuller discussions of Matthew's portrayal of John the Baptist see, among others, W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 27-41; J.P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Matthew", *JBL* 99 (1980), 383-405; E.F. Lupieri, *Giovanni Battista nelle tradizioni sinottiche*, 13-43, 81-113; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 55-60.

<sup>549</sup> The 'Two-Source' hypothesis (which holds that Matthew and Luke used both the Gospel of Mark as well as another unknown source designated 'Q' as bases for their own Gospels) is adopted throughout our investigation. Though some voices are periodically heard in opposition to this hypothesis (e.g. W.R. Farmer), we have indicated above our conviction that the 'Two-Source' hypothesis continues, in the present state of research, to provide the most probable solution to the 'Synoptic Problem'.

<sup>550</sup> For a more comprehensive study of the portrayal of John the Baptist in 'Q', see R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 47-51.

the same time, Matthew identifies some of the people among whom John has success, namely the marginalized members of society (the tax collectors and the prostitutes).

Above all, Matthew presents John as an ascetic who achieved fame and the respect of many of his contemporaries. This popular picture of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel appears to be borne out by Josephus' estimation of the Baptist.<sup>551</sup> Josephus especially gives a very positive picture of the assessment of John by the people when he writes that they interpreted Herod's defeat by the Nabataeans as divine vengeance for Herod's execution of John. John's positive assessment by the people will be dealt with at greater length in the context of Luke-Acts below.

John personifies the disembodied voice of Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries out in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord". In the Isaianic context, the prophet's voice heralds the return of the exiles from Babylon (the so-called 'second exodus') and the establishment of a new socio-religious era. Since Matthew explicitly identifies John the Baptist with Elijah (Matthew 11:14; 17:12), he most likely understands John's garb to suggest that he is a prophet ("garment of camel's hair", reminiscent of the prophet Zechariah [Matthew 13:4]; and the "leather girdle round his waist", reminiscent of the prophet Elijah [2 Kings 1:8]). Thus, like Isaiah's "voice in the desert", John the Baptist calls people to repentance through baptism, by which a new era (or, figuratively as in Isaiah, a 'new exodus') will be brought about and inaugurated in the context of Roman Palestine. Matthew further makes it clear that John's baptism is not to be understood in the normal (though limited) way as a Jewish ceremonial bath to remove contamination contracted as a result of mixing and being in contact with Gentiles. Rather, John's baptism is to be understood in a much broader sense: a general purification of the people of Israel in expectation of the arrival of the "mightier one", of whom John is a herald.

In Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist appears as suddenly as he disappears. He appears at first sight to be nothing more than one of many incidental characters in the narrative. John abruptly appears in Matthew's narrative without any prior introduction. It is simply stated, as a matter of fact, that "In those days came John the

<sup>551</sup> See, for example, *Ant.* 18.5.2; 21.2.6 and the discussion below.

Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea" (Matthew 3:1). This lack of prior introduction is attributed by some scholars to Matthew's assumption that his readers are already quite familiar with the famous Baptizer. There was thus no need to introduce him.<sup>552</sup> Without getting bogged down in a discussion on this point we may nevertheless make the following comment: surely Matthew's audience would have known about Jesus too (and perhaps even better than they might have known John), yet Matthew tells the story of Jesus from the beginning; he starts with the infancy narrative, and he does so at quite some length (Matthew 1:1-2:23). Therefore the assumption that Matthew's readers already knew John the Baptist (hence the lack of any information on his previous history) is not convincing. Clearly what appears to be of importance to Matthew is not the person of John the Baptist as such, but the role John plays in the introduction of Jesus and of his ministry. The pericope on John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-17) is sandwiched between two major narrative blocks: (1) the infancy of Jesus and the return from Egypt (Matthew 2:19-23) where he and his parents had gone to escape the infanticide declared by Herod in Matthew 2:13-15, and (2) the baptism and beginning of the public ministry of Jesus (Matthew 4:1ff). The pericope on John is the transitional point that connects the two blocks of narrative.

#### 8.2.2.2 *John's Message*

In Matthew's Gospel, John's message is presented as having two main themes: (1) repentance and (2) the significance of baptism.

In the first theme (repentance), it seems that only the Pharisees and the Sadducees are addressed (Matthew 3:7). The Pharisees represented the 'holy men' of Israel, who had great influence over the people. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the priestly class, the sons of Zadok (1 Kings 2:35; 1 Chronicles 6:8-15; Ezra 3:2; Ezekiel 40:46). Likewise, they also had great influence over the people, especially in matters pertaining to temple worship. John the Baptist refers to both groups as a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7) because, according to some scholars, for example Alexander Jones,

<sup>552</sup> See, for example, R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, London, The Tyndale Press, 1971, 46.

The Pharisees were, perhaps, more concerned with the religious aspect of the Baptist's movement but, like the Sadducees, they would fear its taking a political turn disastrous alike to the State and to their own interests. They come, therefore, as spies, not as devotees; and John knows it...They have clearly come with subtle and venomous intent.<sup>553</sup>

From them, John asks "fruits that befit repentance" (Matthew 3:8) since they cannot escape the coming wrath of the messianic judgment without a profound change of heart that goes hand in hand with an appropriate change of life. John tells them that the axe is already laid to the root of the trees, to chop down those that do not bear fruit. He shows up their pride in having Abraham as their father (Matthew 3:9) to be baseless, since that will not be the criterion of judgment. The criterion lies, rather, in human deeds (Matthew 7:21-23; 12:50). Therefore the word "fruit/s" is an important one not only in John's message, but also in Matthew's Gospel in general (see, for example, Matthew 7:16-20; 12:33; 21:43).

In dealing with his second theme (the significance of baptism), John the Baptist addresses the whole crowd. John assures them that he and his baptism cannot be compared to "he who is coming". The "coming one" is mightier than John, so mighty, in fact, that John assumes a position less than that of a slave in comparison to him (Matthew 3:11).<sup>554</sup> It is to be noted that in all four Gospels John thinks of himself and of his own baptism as inferior when compared with the "coming one" and his baptism. It is in acknowledgment of this inferiority that John is initially reticent about baptizing Jesus. Whereas John baptizes with water for repentance, "he who is coming" will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). Just as the axe had already been laid to the roots of the trees (against the Pharisees and Sadducees) to cut down the fruitless ones; the "coming one" will have a winnowing fork in his hand, to separate the good grain from the chaff (Matthew 3:12). Here too, the motif of judgment is strongly brought out; for the religious leadership (the Pharisees and the Sadducees), as well as for the people in general.

<sup>553</sup> A. Jones, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 61.

<sup>554</sup> In the cultural world of the ancient Mediterranean, a servant's lowest tasks involved the master's feet: either washing them, carrying the master's sandals (as in Matthew 3:11), or unfastening the straps of the sandals (e.g. Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16). See also Matthew 20:20-27.



John's baptism was a baptism of cleansing, and those who submitted to it first made a confession of their sins. Yet it is clear to both John the Baptist and to Matthew that the baptism was not an end in itself, but a preparation for the greater baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire, a baptism to be administered by "the coming one". Matthew tells us that John exhorted people to repent, for the "kingdom of heaven" was at hand (Matthew 3:2). The expression ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ("the kingdom of the heavens") is unique to Matthew. It has been observed in different contexts that Matthew is the "most Jewish of the Gospels",<sup>555</sup> and that therefore there is an aversion to using the name of God. Thus, "the kingdom of heaven" (which throughout Mark and Luke is referred to as ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ - "the kingdom of God") is a substitute for the name of "God" that was avoided by devout Jews.

Whereas in Mark 1:4 John's baptism is said to be a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (also in Luke 3:3), Matthew replaces the "baptism...for the forgiveness of sins" with "Turn away from your sins, for the kingdom of heaven is near", and he does this apparently for two reasons: (1) by using the words "turn away from your sins" (which has the root meaning of the Old Testament word for "repent") Matthew associates John the Baptist with the prophetic tradition (though in 11:9 Matthew makes it clear that John is "more than a prophet"), and (2) by using the phrase "for the kingdom of heaven is near" Matthew does not want to associate John's baptism with forgiveness of sins, for in Matthew's Gospel only Jesus has the power to forgive sins (for example in Matthew 26:28).

In exhorting his hearers to repent, John makes a distinction: the wrath of God is not directed against all Israel (as in Luke), but rather against the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, the rest are not to delude themselves with a false sense of security either. To drive the point home, John uses a realistic image known to all as it is drawn from the agricultural activity of the people, the "winnowing fork" (Mt. 3:11), an instrument used for threshing grain and separating the good grain from the chaff.<sup>556</sup>

<sup>555</sup> See Charpentier, *Reading the New Testament*, 70-71.

<sup>556</sup> According to F.N. Hepper (*Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Plants*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, 90-91), archaeologists have recovered some winnowing forks or shovels. This has been cited as evidence that the image used by John the Baptist was well known to his audience.

In demanding to see the “fruits” of the baptism, John overthrows all security in ritual: what matters is not merely the fact of baptism, but the “fruit” of the baptism. It has been noted that the “Baptist was even prone to discourage baptism; he is not after cheap success with hosts of the baptized whose hearts are not renewed”.<sup>557</sup> This puts his criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees into perspective: they consider themselves to be the devout ones in society, while, in spite of the baptism they have received, they still remain a “brood of vipers” since the ritual of baptism has not made any difference in their actions.

#### 8.2.2.3. *John and Jesus*

The Gospels of Matthew (Matthew 3:13-15) and John (John 1:29-36) are unique in the Gospel tradition in that they are the only ones in which there is a personal encounter (as opposed to the impersonal contact during Jesus’ baptism in Mark and Luke) between Jesus and John the Baptist. The encounter is even more dramatic in Matthew (Matthew 3:13-15) in that John the Baptist and Jesus not only recognize each other but engage in a discussion with each other:

*Narrator:* Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying:

*John:* “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

*Narrator:* But Jesus answered him:

*Jesus:* “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

*Narrator:* Then [John] consented.

In this dialogue between John and Jesus, Matthew places Jesus in a position of superiority above John. This is clear in the way John had reservations about baptizing

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<sup>557</sup> E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, 49.

Jesus: "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (Matthew 3:14). According to E. Schweizer,

Verse 14 clearly expresses the problem that Jesus' baptism presented to the community...Matthew is more interested in the historical juxtaposition of the community of Jesus and the disciples of John, and therefore also in the correct teaching about Christ. He therefore states the actual problem involved in the baptism of Jesus: can Jesus Christ subordinate himself to John?<sup>558</sup>

Jesus has come all the way from Nazareth (where Matthew left him in 2:23) to be baptized. John's fame had obviously spread far and wide, and Jesus comes to associate himself, by baptism, with all those who looked forward to the messianic era of which John was believed to be a harbinger. It is only in Matthew 3:14-15 that John is presented as being shocked at the inversion of roles: it should be Jesus who baptizes John, not the other way round, but, showing that righteousness and submission (to the Law) that are characteristic of the Matthean Jesus, Jesus puts John at ease by reassuring him: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Only then does John consent to baptizing Jesus. Whereas John recognizes Jesus' superiority, Jesus, however, humbles himself and identifies with John's mission: "it is fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness", he says in the plural. This dialogue between John and Jesus is striking in that it is found only in Matthew. Though Matthew has taken the outline of the narrative of the baptism of Jesus from Mark, he has inserted the two verses (Matthew 3:14,15 = the dialogue) in order to unite the missions of John and Jesus, a unity that, according to T.H. Robinson, Matthew further strengthens in the narrative of John's execution by Herod. Commenting on that narrative (Matthew 14:1-11), Robinson notes:

An additional note at the end tells us (as Mark does not) that after the burial of the body [of John], the disciples of John came and reported to Jesus what had happened. Evidently the writer's thought is that Jesus is the true successor of John, and that the followers of the latter will naturally attach themselves to the former.<sup>559</sup>

<sup>558</sup> E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, Atlanta, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1975, 53. For a differently nuanced interpretation of Jesus' baptism by John – an interpretation that seeks to answer the Christological question: "What sort of a Son of God is he who accepts baptism by the lesser one?" – see further U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1989, 173-181.

<sup>559</sup> T.H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1939, 127. A.L. Williams (*The Hebrew-Christian Messiah, : The Presentation of the Messiah to the Jews in the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916), however, disputes the

That John recognized Jesus and his authority is clear in Matthew's Gospel. However the question remains as to whether John also saw the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16), and whether he also heard the voice from heaven ("This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" – Matthew 3:17). Indeed, the question may be asked whether anybody else apart from Jesus witnessed this event. It seems unlikely that, for Matthew, John saw or heard anything, for these events happened after Jesus had been baptized and was already out of the water. The picture generally painted for us in Matthew's Gospel concerning John's baptizing activity is that it was very popular and people came in droves from far and wide to be baptized: "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan, and they were baptized by [John] in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:5-6). One is left with a visual image of a very busy John who has people milling all around him awaiting their turn to be baptized. After baptizing one person, John would immediately move on to the next one. It would thus not be out of turn to suppose, as some scholars have long done,<sup>560</sup> that John was not a witness to the descent of the Holy Spirit and to the voice from heaven. In any case, according to Matthew 3:13-15, John already knew who Jesus was, and the identification indicated by the statement "This is my beloved Son" would thus have been superfluous for him. It was because of his recognition of who Jesus was that made John unwilling to baptize him. The parting of the heavens, the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the voice from heaven were either personal, private experiences of Jesus, to which nobody else was a witness,<sup>561</sup> or this was an occasion used by Matthew to

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second statement made by Robinson, for Williams notes that "many of those who professed to be John's disciples refused to acknowledge Jesus. They considered the austere teacher, by whose instrumentality they had been brought to repent their former ways, to be superior to Jesus of Nazareth", a "riddle" that Williams admits he has "not the means of fully solving" (:38).

<sup>560</sup> See, for example, J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, 14; D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, Pickering, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1979, 59; B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990, 150-151). It would, however, be stretching the matter too far to suggest, as A.H. McNeile (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, London, MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1938) appears to do, that Jesus was more or less 'seeing things'. McNeile holds that "The vision and the voice, then, were a real subjective experience. The sight of the opened heavens was not unnatural to one in a state of spiritual exaltation (cf. Ez. 1.1, Ac. Vii.56). The voice was an expression - as in the case of many other mystics - of the deepest convictions of His soul" (:36). While T.H. Robinson (*The Gospel of Matthew*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1939, 17-18) does not exactly discuss the issue, he nonetheless gives the impression that the whole episode was of significance for Jesus alone, which may mean that no one else was a witness to the descent of the Holy Spirit and to God's acknowledgment of Jesus as his Son.

<sup>561</sup> Note McNeile's observation that "Had a crowd of people seen the open heavens and the dove, and heard the voice, the report must have spread rapidly over the whole district. But xvi. 13-17,20, and

reveal the nature of Jesus to his audience.<sup>562</sup> C.S. Keener, however, begs to differ.<sup>563</sup> According to him, the parting of the heavens and the heavenly voice were “objective” experiences of the whole crowd:

Matthew’s alteration of Mark here suggests that he viewed the parting of the heavens as an objective experience and not merely Jesus’ vision. Further, his change of Mark’s “You are my Son” to “This is my Son” suggests a public theophany and testimony to Jesus.<sup>564</sup>

Similarly, W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison argue on grammatical grounds that the opening of the heavens, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven were a public experience:

καὶ εἶδεν [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] θεοῦ καταβαῖνον ὡσεὶ περιστέρην. Matthew has displaced εἶδεν so that it now comes after the opening of the heavens. This makes the event more public because the occurrence in the sky is no longer qualified by ‘he saw’ but instead narrated as a straightforward fact: ‘and behold! The heavens opened...’. Similarly, the alteration in 3:17 of Mark’s ‘You are my Son’ to ‘This is my Son’ serves the same purpose: the voice is not speaking to Jesus alone. Seemingly, therefore, and despite the singular form of the verb, εἶδεν, at least two people, Jesus and John, are privy to the events recounted.<sup>565</sup>

#### 8.2.2.3.1. John and Jesus: Matthean Parallels

On various occasions Matthew draws close parallels between Jesus and John the Baptist. For example, Jesus’ appearance is announced in the same way as John’s. The same rare verb παραγίνεται (“came”) is used for both (Matthew 3:1; 13); the message of Jesus in Matthew 4:17 sounds like John’s message: “From that time, Jesus

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many other indications, shew that the Lord’s Messiahship was an unknown truth. If He and the Baptist were alone (see Plummer, *St. Luke*, 98) the difficulty is not lessened: John would have told his disciples, and the report would have spread as quickly. Moreover, if John did not receive such a sign from heaven, it is easier to understand how he could ask the question recorded in Mt. xi. 3. There is nothing in Mk. or Lk. to suggest that the vision or the voice was vouchsafed to anyone but Jesus; and the same is true of Mt...”, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 35-36.

<sup>562</sup> So W.D. Davies & D.C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. I, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988): “For Matthew, ‘Son (of God)’ is a key christological title...pregnant with various associations in Judaism and in the ancient world in general. Should we not think that to some extent all of these associations, in so far as they were known to Matthew and thought of by him in a positive fashion, were considered by the evangelist to have been fulfilled or brought to perfection in the person of Jesus?” (:339-340). See further pages 334-336.

<sup>563</sup> It is not as though this difference of opinion begins with Keener. There has been a long tradition of scholars who hold that John was privy to the descent of the Holy Spirit and to the voice from heaven. See, for example, the position of A.L. Williams, *The Hebrew-Christian Messiah*, 39-41.

<sup>564</sup> C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999, 134. Keener makes reference to J.P. Meier (*The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel*, 58) for corroboration of his position.

<sup>565</sup> W.D. Davies & D.C. Allison, *A Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 330.



began to preach, saying, '*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*'. Other parallels in the messages of John and Jesus are:

<i>John's Message</i>	<i>Jesus' Message</i>
<b>3:10</b> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.	<b>7:19</b> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
<b>3:12</b> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.	<b>13:30</b> Let both grow together until harvest time; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.
<b>3:7</b> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"	<b>23:33</b> You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?
<b>14:5</b> And though [Herod] wanted to put [John the Baptist] to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.	<b>23:31</b> Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <b>23:32</b> Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.

Further, in Mathew 17:10-13 (= Mark 9:11-13) Jesus openly states that he must go the way of John the Baptist: "but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands". Whereas John had always been presented not just in the guise of a prophet, but *as* a prophet, Jesus is in turn said by Herod to be John *redivivus* (Matthew 14:1). Matthew also presents John's death as foreshadowing the imminent martyrdom of Jesus himself (Matthew 5:12; 17:12). According to C.S. Keener, the parallels are further developed:

John introduced Jesus, proclaiming the same message that Jesus would (3:2; 4:17). After Jesus promises persecution and speaks of prophets (10:17-42), he praises John in prison as his ally (11:2-19). But nowhere does John's fate prefigure that of Jesus so clearly as here [the martyrdom of John]: if Jesus himself proves to be a "prophet without honor" among his people (13:53-58), what is to keep him (or his followers) from the fate of John the Baptist (14:1-12)?<sup>566</sup>

The pre-occupation with parallels between John the Baptist and Jesus should, however, not lead us to ignore some major differences between them. For example John, in stark contrast to Jesus, was an ascetic (Matthew 11:18). Also, Matthew 9:14

<sup>566</sup> C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 397.

(like Acts 19:1-7, and 1 John 5:6-8) betrays considerable tension between the disciples of John the Baptist and Jesus and/or his disciples.

One of the compositional styles of Matthew has been recognized by scholars to be the explicit comparison of, and especially the implicit drawing of parallels between Jesus and others. In addition to those noted above, other explicit comparisons include, for example, Matthew 12:38-41 ("something greater than Jonah is here"); Matthew 12:42 ("something greater than Solomon is here"); Matthew 16:13-14 ("Who do men say that the Son of man is? And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets'"). In addition, in summarizing the activities of John and Jesus, Matthew says they both announce the same message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2 and 4:17).

This drawing of explicit and implicit parallels between Jesus and other characters in the Gospel is much more pronounced in the case of John the Baptist. We find such comparisons in no fewer than eleven instances throughout Matthew's Gospel. These comparisons, according to U. Luz, are a sign that Matthew does not see any break between the story of Jesus and that of John the Baptist.<sup>567</sup> For example, Luz notes that John's proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven corresponds literally to that of Jesus in Matthew 4:17 ("From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'"), and the same message is later extended by the disciples in Matthew 10:7 ("As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'"). The conclusion to be drawn from this, according to Luz, is that "John and Jesus thus belong together".<sup>568</sup>

On the basis of his conviction that "from such obvious and extended assimilation of Jesus and John the Baptist....we may extract that Matthew was wont to comprehend his Lord and illustrate his significance through comparison with others",<sup>569</sup> D.C. Allison has drawn together with care the instances of implicit parallelism between John the Baptist and Jesus that run throughout Matthew's Gospel. In some instances the parallelism is not limited to the type of event or incident, but includes the use of

<sup>567</sup> See U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 166-167.

<sup>568</sup> U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 166-167.

<sup>569</sup> D.C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993, 139.

the very same words to describe the events in both the lives of John the Baptist and of Jesus. We are indebted to Allison for the comparative table that follows,<sup>570</sup> to which we have made minor changes:

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN JOHN THE BAPTIST & JESUS IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL	
JOHN THE BAPTIST	J E S U S
John said: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2)	Jesus said: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17)
John said to Pharisees and Sadducees: "You brood of vipers" (3:7)	Jesus said to the Pharisees: "You brood of vipers" (12:34)
John said: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (3:10)	Jesus said: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (7:10)
The people regarded John as a prophet (11:9; 14:5)	The people regarded Jesus as a prophet (21:11,26,46).
John was rejected by "this generation" (11:16-19)	Jesus was rejected by "this generation" (11:16-19)
Herod the tetrarch was responsible for John's death	Pilate the governor was responsible for Jesus' death
John was seized (κρατέω, 14:3)	Jesus was seized (κρατέω, 21:46)
John was bound (δέω, 14:3)	Jesus was bound (δέω, 27:2)
Herod feared the crowds because they held John to be a prophet (14:5)	The chief priests and Pharisees feared the crowds because they held Jesus to be a prophet (21:46)
Herod was asked by another to execute John and grieved so to do (14:6-11)	Pilate was asked by others to execute Jesus and was reluctant so to do (27:11-26)
John was buried by his disciples (14:12)	Jesus was buried by a disciple (27:57-61)

Jesus' admission to being baptized by John the Baptist is sometimes interpreted within the broad social and cultural environment of the time; a cultural background in which society stressed honour and shame. A detailed description of these conditions follows below in the context of the social and cultural environment within which John ministered. Jesus' act of allowing himself to be baptized is seen as a "public act of humility";<sup>571</sup> an act by which Jesus, being the mightier one, submits to the baptism of one of lower status than he – John the Baptist. Jesus submitted to John's baptism not because he needed to be baptized (Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was the giver of

<sup>570</sup> D.C. Allison, *The New Moses*, 137-139. See further other helpful parallels in pp. 142-143 (parallel between Jesus' return from Egypt and Israel's departure from that land), p.144 (parallel between the story of Moses and the story of Jesus); and pp.145-146 (parallel between the Pharaoh's order to have Hebrew male children slain and Herod's order to have Hebrew infants slain). For similar parallels between John the Baptist and Jesus see J.P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel", *JBL* 99 (1980):383-405. For more instances of Matthew's assimilation of John to Jesus, see further W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 33-39.

<sup>571</sup> See C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 131-135, especially page 131.

the true baptism – Matthew 3:11), but because he was fulfilling God's will (Matthew 3:14-15). By thus admitting to being baptized like the common crowds that flocked to John for baptism, Jesus "relinquishes his rightful honor to embrace others' shame".<sup>572</sup> But Matthew does not dwell on Jesus' acceptance of 'humiliation' by baptism. By the simple use of the participle βαπτισθεὶς ("having been baptized"), Matthew quickly passes over the baptism episode so that the incident might not disturb his audience.<sup>573</sup>

#### 8.2.2.4 *The Death of John the Baptist*

According to Matthew, John the Baptist had already been taken prisoner before Jesus began his Galilean ministry (Matthew 4:13). Matthew outlines for us the circumstances leading to John's arrest and his subsequent execution (Matthew 14:1-12). Basically, John the Baptist, like the prophets before him both in appearance and austerity of life as well as in fearlessly reproaching errant leadership, had spoken against Herod's incestuous marriage to Herodias, his sister-in-law (Matthew 14:3-4). Herodias wanted vengeance on John for denouncing her sin in public. In true prophetic fashion, John (the prophet) had publicly spoken against the vices of the king (Herod) and his family members, and he suffered the consequences, like so many other prophets before him.

The role played by Herodias and her daughter in the execution of John is striking. A lot has been written regarding the significance of Herodias' daughter, her dance, and the possible state of mind of the guests gathered to celebrate Herod's birthday.<sup>574</sup> It is noted that lewd dancing was a regular feature of the kind of celebration Herod had, a result of drunkenness, and loss of self-control. Quoting H. Anderson (1976:166), Keener says that Herodias' daughter's dance was

<sup>572</sup> C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 131.

<sup>573</sup> Keener explains how, following Lucian (*History* 6) and Theon (*Progymn.* 5.52-56), "it was an established rhetorical practice to hurry most quickly over points that might disturb the audience" (:131).

<sup>574</sup> See, for example, Josephus' *Antiquities* 18.137; H.W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, 155-157; G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, 90-99; C.H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 87; W.L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974, 221; D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, London, SCM Press, 1977, 175. See also Esther 1:11; 5:3; Mark. 6:23.

an improbably bizarre touch, which could forthwith be dismissed as fictional, were it not a known fact that the excesses of the Herodian court were in most respects quite notorious.<sup>575</sup>

Keener makes the further observation that while dancing was a "regular feature" of parties where a lot of drinking was involved, it took one in a "drunken stupor" to invite a member of the royal family to dance. It was also not unheard of for rulers to offer women whatever they wanted (Matthew 14:7), including even part of their kingdom.<sup>576</sup>

The vacillating character of Herod when it comes to the actual execution of John is rather difficult to explain, given the fact that he felt "sorry" (Matthew 14:9) at his daughter's request to kill somebody that he himself had anyhow wanted to put to death earlier on (Matthew 14:5). The fact that in verse 5 he had not killed John the Baptist for fear of the people ("because they held him to be a prophet") does not explain why, in verse 14, this fear has suddenly vanished. Surely Herod had more to fear from a popular uprising than from not keeping his word before a group of inebriated friends!

At the end of the narrative about John's death, Matthew has John's disciples take John's body for burial, and then they go to Jesus and tell him of John's fate (Matthew 14:12).

To conclude the profile of John the Baptist we encounter in Matthew's Gospel, we concur with W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison in their observation that in this Gospel we are presented with only a "silhouette" of John. He is

no independent figure. He is viewed only from a Christian perspective. As the voice of Isa 40, as one like Elijah, as a baptizer, and as a preacher, John only prepares for Jesus. His words and deeds point away from himself to one incomparably greater.<sup>577</sup>

<sup>575</sup> C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 400. See further footnotes 12 and 13 on the same page for a more detailed discussion of the "loose morals" of the Herodian women in particular, and the bad behaviour of people at the parties of the wealthy in general.

<sup>576</sup> Keener gives various examples from ancient Greek and Hebrew literature. See his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 400.

<sup>577</sup> W.D. Davies & D.C. Allison, *A Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. I, 343.



R.L. Webb comes to more or less the same conclusion, though he adds an important element that most studies on Matthew's presentation of John the Baptist seem to miss. Webb rightly observes that while Matthew's presentation of John "does not differ markedly from that of his sources" (namely, Mark and 'Q'), Matthew's "*interpretation* of John is somewhat different: he makes more explicit John's identity as Elijah *redivivus*". Webb further observes that

While John is more clearly subordinated to Jesus...John is also more completely identified and associated with Jesus not only as his ally, but as the one who prefigures Jesus' death.<sup>578</sup>

### 8.2.3 *John the Baptist in 'Q'*

It is not our purpose, within the limits of the present study, to engage in the fascinating (though complex) discussion revolving around the Synoptic Problem, for the mere mention of this hypothetical other source, commonly called 'Q' (or, more accurately, the 'Sayings Source'), that is believed to have been used by Luke and Matthew in addition to Mark. This discussion is fraught with more questions than have been answered by scholarship. Any reader of the New Testament will certainly not fail to notice and to be intrigued by the abundant agreements and numerous puzzling disagreements and even outright contradictions among the Gospels. What scholarship across the spectrum does agree on is that there is some sort of relationship between the Gospels – particularly the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Scholarship is further in agreement that at some point perhaps before and/or during their writing both Luke and Matthew had access to material which they both used – material that was either not available to Mark, or for some reason simply omitted by him altogether. Equally certain among scholars is this other fact: that both Luke and Matthew, independently of each other, had access to material uniquely their own, namely material that is found only in Luke (the so-called 'L' source), and material found only in Matthew (the so-called 'M' source). And there the consensus stops. The reader is referred to the proliferation of literature<sup>579</sup> on the source 'Q', the

<sup>578</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 60. See further J.P. Meier's argument that Matthew presents John the Baptist as both subordinate to, and parallel with Jesus, in "John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel", *JBL* 99 (1980), 383-405.

<sup>579</sup> We list here a only few of the material available on studies 'Q' and related matters since 1980: A.D. Jacobson, "The Literary Unity of Q", *JBL* 101 (1982), 365-389; R.A. Horsley & J.A. Draper,

Synoptic Problem in general, the Two-Source (or Two-Document) hypothesis, the Griesbach hypothesis, and other hypotheses that have been proffered in an attempt at making sense of what has been called the "*concordia discors*" between the first three Gospels of the canonical New Testament. It would be quite an achievement if the reader emerged from that sea of disputation with a clear head.

Yet another matter that has for long vexed scholars is that of the actual nature of 'Q': was this a written source (so the dominant position of many scholars), or was it an oral source (so a minority position that is, however, rapidly gaining in currency with the powerful support of anthropology, sociology, and the social sciences in general).<sup>580</sup> Arguments traditionally adduced in favour of viewing 'Q' as a literary source are well known, chief among them being the close semantic formulations (or "strong verbal agreements...the use of peculiar or unusual phrases...agreements in the order of Q *pericopae* and the phenomenon of doublets", so J. Kloppenborg)<sup>581</sup> in which some sections of text are reproduced word for word, including even the smallest details in some cases, from one synoptic writer to the next.

This belief has both informed and guided scholarly discussion on 'Q' for over a century.<sup>582</sup> Indeed, until the breaking of the social sciences into this discussion, many convincing arguments were adduced in support of 'Q' as a written document.<sup>583</sup> Recent trends have, however, begun to swing the pendulum considerably in favour of

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*Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1999; J.S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987; R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*; B.L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, San Francisco, Harper, 1993; R.A. Edwards, *A Theology of Q*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987; T.A. Friedrichsen, "The Matthew-Luke Agreements against Mark. A Survey of Recent Studies: 1974-1989" in F. Neirynck (ed.), *The Gospel of Luke*, 335-392; D. Lührmann, "The Gospel of Mark and the Sayings Collection Q", *JBL* 108 (1989), 51-71; F. Neirynck, "Introduction: The Two-Source Hypothesis" in D.L. Dungan (ed.), *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, Leuven, Peeters, 1990, 23-46; R.H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1987.

<sup>580</sup> See, for example, the arguments of J.A. Draper in favour of viewing 'Q' as an oral tradition, in "Recovering Oral Performance from Written Text in Q", in R.A. Horsley & J.A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, 175-194. See also Draper's article, "Recovering Oral Tradition Fixed in Text: The Case of Q3:7-22; 4:1-13" in P. Denis (ed.), *Orality, Memory and the Past: Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy under Colonialism and Apartheid*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2000, 85-111.

<sup>581</sup> J. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, 42.

<sup>582</sup> See H.J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien*, Leipzig, Engelmann, 1863.

<sup>583</sup> See, for example, J. Kloppenborg's main considerations for rejecting the possibility that 'Q' could have been an oral tradition in his *The Formation of Q*, 42.

other possibilities. The one currently holding the greater currency has been strongly argued by J.A. Draper and R.A. Horsley among others. This is the view that 'Q' was probably an oral tradition. Insights drawn from anthropologists, sociologists, the performing arts and literary dramatization<sup>584</sup> have been used to argue for the 'orality' of 'Q'. Where these aspects have been taken into consideration, it has been observed how the assumptions of form criticism in respect of the nature and form of the oral tradition (as compared to the textual tradition) can be shown by modern evidence to be eminently inappropriate, if not indeed altogether false.

However, the stronger view is that 'Q' was an *oral* rather than a written source. A number of scholars are arguing, rather persuasively, for a shift in perspective, maintaining that the oral tradition is the better (if not natural) location for 'Q'. J.A. Draper, for example, has dismissed the incidence of verbal agreement between Mark, Matthew, and Luke as a basis on which to argue that 'Q' was a literary tradition for, as Draper argues,

the existence of a common order for the *pericopae* is no argument against oral tradition at all: it assumes that oral tradition is passed on in small disembodied units with no identifiable context.<sup>585</sup>

Arguing from insights from anthropology and the study of the songs, poetry, and proverbs of pre-literate societies, as well as from the phenomenon of the continuing evolution of oral traditions even long after the primary oral societies that created those traditions have become literate, Draper has made a strong point in showing that

the traditional New Testament model of little separate units of tradition floating around in some kind of folk limbo is inaccurate...oral tradition in peasant communities is more integrated than this and would have been performed in larger units on specific community occasions."

'Q' is, according to Draper, a product of such integrated community oral as well as aural performance. Therefore, instead of looking for the origin of 'Q' in the written

<sup>584</sup> J.A. Draper has, for example, noted how "Illiterate or semi-literate people who perform the Bible stories and sayings orally in a rich interpretive tradition can sometimes quote chapter and verse!" (:89).

<sup>585</sup> J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition Fixed in Text", 88.

text, we should rather turn to the societal and communitarian matrix that generates the oral tradition that lies behind the written tradition.

As noted earlier, the question of 'Q' arises in the broader discussion of the Synoptic Problem, a discussion that is as fascinating as it is complex. Below is a very general and much simplified presentation of the Synoptic Gospels in which the root of the Synoptic Problem immediately becomes evident:

MATTHEW	MARK*	LUKE	PERICOPE
8:1-4	1:40-44	5:12-14	The healing of a leper
9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26	The healing of a paralytic
17:1-8	9:2-8	9:28-36	The transfiguration
19:16-30	10:17-31	18:18-27	The parable of the rich young man
20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-43	The healing of Bartimaeus
21:1-9	11:1-10	19:28-38	Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem
21:23-27	11:27-33	20:1-8	The authority of Jesus
3:7-10		3:7-10	The preaching of John the Baptist
6:24		16:13	On serving two masters
6:25-34		12:22-31	On anxiety
11:1-7		7:24-28	Jesus' testifies about John the Baptist
12:43-45		11:24-26	On the unclean spirits
24:45-51		12:42-46	On readiness and watchfulness
4:18-22	1:16-20		The calling of the Disciples
13:53-58	6:1-6		Jesus is rejected at Nazareth
20:20-28	10:35-45		The request of James and John
26:6-13	14:3-9		The anointing of Jesus at Bethany
27:27-31	15:16-20		Jesus is mocked by the soldiers
	1:21-28	4:31-37	The rejection of Jesus at Capernaum
	12:38-40	20:46-47	Warning against Scribes and Pharisees
	12:41-44	21:1-4	The widow's small offering

\* It will be noted that only the following few verses of Mark (accepted by the majority of scholars as the primary Gospel on which Matthew and Luke based their accounts) are unique to him (i.e. they do not occur either in Matthew or in Luke): 4:26-29 and 8:22-26.



Our interest in 'Q' lies in so far as it has bearing on the subject of our inquiry, namely John the Baptist. What does 'Q' say about John the Baptist? What image does this source portray of John? And where (and why) does that image differ from the one presented in Mark or in the Fourth Gospel? On this question of the 'Q' material in respect of John, though Draper acknowledges that nothing is, in fact, known of the origin of the tradition concerning John the Baptist, he makes the striking observation that "the teaching of the Baptist...manifests a strongly marked oral style, with mnemonic traits which would enable it to be passed on very accurately."<sup>586</sup>

In another place, and still in connection with the question of the presentation of John the Baptist in 'Q', Draper maintains that

The strong verbal agreement in the accounts of the preaching of the Baptist may be the result of a well established, often repeated tradition. Ritually performed, mnemonically structured or proverbial material tends to be more fixed in form than narrative or philosophical material.<sup>587</sup>

The following is a synopsis of the *pericopae* on John the Baptist in the 'Q' tradition and – for purposes of comparison – in the Triple Tradition (Luke and Matthew, including Mark):

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<sup>586</sup> J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition Fixed in Text", 88.

<sup>587</sup> J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition Fixed in Text", 87.

'Q'			'Triple Tradition'
LUKE	MATTHEW	EPISODE	Mark
3:1-20	3:1-12	The preaching of John: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand".	1:2-6
5:33	9:14-17	Question about fasting: "The disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'"	
7:18-23	11:2-6	John (in prison) sends his disciples to Jesus to ask: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"	
7:24-35	11:7-19	Jesus testifies about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?...To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist...he is Elijah who is to come".	
9:7-9	14:1-12	The killing of John the Baptist for displeasing Herod and Herodias by castigating their incestuous marriage.	6:14-16
9:18-20	16:13-16	Jesus' disciples testify about John: "Who do men say that the son of man is?"...And they said, "Some say John the Baptist..."	8:27-30
16:16	11:12	Jesus testifies about John: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence...For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John".	
20:1-8	21:23-27	Chief priests and elders of the people question Jesus' authority. He takes the challenge and responds he will answer them only if they in turn are able to answer the question: "The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men?"	11:27-33
20:6	21:26	Chief priests and elders of the people express the public's opinion of John: "If we say, 'From men', we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet."	

### 8.2.3.1 A Brief Comment on the Synopsis

The differences between 'Q' and Mark in their presentation of John the Baptist are fundamental: In 'Q', John appears above all as a prophet and as a baptizer. A major difference is that in 'Q' John is presented as a baptist in his own right, whereas in Mark he is subordinated to Jesus. Whatever John does in 'Q', Jesus will do better in Mark. This is also evident in the citation of Malachi 3:1, which both 'Q' and Mark refer to. The context in which 'Q' cites the Old Testament text is that John was a forerunner of Yahweh's judgment – he was sent to proclaim the forthcoming judgment of Yahweh. This places John on an elevated pedestal, directly in line with the prophets of old, in the sphere of the divine. John the Baptist was the Elijah to precede the judgment that was to inaugurate the eschatological era. Matthew states flatly: "[John] is Elijah who is to come" (Matthew 11:19).

But in Mark, however, the same text from Malachi is used to declare that John is a forerunner *for Jesus*. His task is to prepare the way not for the coming of God's

judgment, but for the coming of Jesus. Thus in Mark, John is not portrayed as a prophet in his own right, but in 'Q' John is an independent preacher (like the prophets of old) before the imminent judgment of Yahweh – though A.D. Jacobson believes that in this particular section “a late addition to Q (Luke 7:28 par.) seeks to subordinate John to Jesus”, without giving any supporting evidence.

### 8.2.3.2 *John the Baptist as Prophet in Q*

In 'Q', John is unquestionably presented as a prophet. Indeed, Matthew goes so far as to say that John “is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:19), while in both Matthew (11:9) and Luke (7:26) Jesus extols John as “more than a prophet”. And, as we have noted, in the material special to Luke, the circumstances leading to John's birth are redolent with prophetic motifs and typology. Generally in 'Q', the word 'prophet', or some Old Testament citation in relation from, or in relation to one of the prophets, or indeed direct reference to a particular prophet, are always to be found in pericopae relating to John the Baptist. The John of 'Q' is not only cast in the prophetic mould, but he *is* a prophet, and probably the last of the prophets (Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16).

Some modern scholars, however, see the prophethood of John the Baptist (and indeed the Gospels' entire episode relating to him) as a later Christian construct, at the service of the catechetical and evangelical needs of the early Christian community.

Bruce Chilton, who advocates an overly cautious attitude towards the historical reliability of the Gospels, is fundamentally of the idea that there is a need to “free John from the apologetic and catechetical aims of the Synoptics in regard to his purpose”.<sup>588</sup> Whatever the Synoptics have to say about John the Baptist is, according to Chilton, catechetically and christologically coloured (but then is not the entire New Testament presented in similar shades?), and is intended to encourage believers to look forward to baptism “after the manner of Jesus who is greater than John”.<sup>589</sup>

<sup>588</sup> B. Chilton, “John the Baptist: His Immersion and his Death”, 43.

<sup>589</sup> B. Chilton, “John the Baptist: His Immersion and his Death”, 29. Chilton appears at times to be impatient with even the possibility that, for all their imperfections (and we admit there are many), the Gospel accounts regarding John the Baptist might indeed have some basic kernel of historical reliability: “What if we were to entertain the possibility of a Josephan chronology for John, and dispense with the Synoptic chronology?<sup>589</sup> ... John need no longer be dated within the Synoptic chronology, whose usage as a catechetical instrument makes it an unreliable historical tool” (:43)

Did Jesus, then, really compare John to Elijah or not (for example at Matthew 11:7-19)? According to Chilton this is unlikely. However, he does note that such a comparison was important for 'Q' – "whether or not Jesus compared John to Elijah, it is evident that the Christology of "Q" has an interest in the comparison"<sup>590</sup> – and the same appears, indeed, to be true for the entire Gospel tradition:

That John should be taken as a prophet within the Gospels, then, is entirely natural. It permits him to be seen as a prototype of Christian teachers who were also seen as prophets. But the more natural it is within evangelical preaching to portray John as a prophet, the less reasonable it is to claim that is what he was within his own estimate or his sympathizers".<sup>591</sup>

Chilton concludes that this entire section on John the Baptist in 'Q' was, in reality, meant to serve not so much a historical purpose as a catechetical one for the encouragement of Christian converts:

John's preaching of repentance in the mishnaic source conventionally known as "Q" is replete with warnings and encouragements for potential converts: Jewish opponents are a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7/Luke 3:7); what matters is producing fruits worthy of repentance rather than genetic kinship with Abraham (Matthew 3:8, 9/Luke 3:8), and the urgency of the imperative to repent is as keen as an axe laid at the root of a tree (Matthew 3:10/Luke 3:9). Whatever may or may not be reflected of John's preaching here, it is evidently cast within the needs of Christian catechesis and addressed to sympathetic hearers who are assumed to be at the margins of Judaism. Likewise, the advice to relatively prosperous converts in Luke 3:10-14 [...] is redolent of a social setting more reminiscent of Lukan Antioch than of the baptist's Peraea: charitable giving by revenue contractors and Roman soldiers is not likely to have been the burden of the historical John's message.<sup>592</sup>

In other words, according to Chilton John was not a prophet in reality, but his activity was accorded prophetic interpretation by the tendentiousness of 'Q' and the other Gospel writers. John the prophet was created by the Gospel writers as a "prototype of Christian teachers who were also seen as prophets"<sup>593</sup>...John's status as a prophet derives from the tradition of Christian apologetics".<sup>594</sup> For Chilton that fact alone is sufficient to lead him to the conclusion that John was not, and certainly did not see himself as a prophet, nor did those around him.

<sup>590</sup> B.D. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, 3.

<sup>591</sup> B. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, 29-30.

<sup>592</sup> B. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, 9-10.

<sup>593</sup> B. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, 10. See also on pages 22, 27, 30.

<sup>594</sup> B. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, 43.

C.A. Evans, on the other hand, is in agreement with those who see John not only as a prophet in 'Q' and in the other Gospels, but he believes that in locating himself at the Jordan River, "John's deliberate choice of this site indicates that the Baptist probably did see himself as Elijah *redivivus*."<sup>595</sup> Scobie stretches the point further and hints at the possibility that John is cast not only as a new Elijah, but possibly as the Messiah himself. Scobie is convinced that the birth narrative indicates such a high estimate of John that he is presented not only as the new Elijah, but that "indeed John himself is virtually cast in [the role of the Messiah]".<sup>596</sup>

While the questions raised by this and similar positions require fuller and more vigorous treatment elsewhere and in a different context, we may briefly note that

- a) Chilton's exegesis (or rather lack thereof) is the weakest element in his argumentation. It was not only the task of the prophet to *do* but to *be* a messenger, a preparer of people for the coming judgment of Yahweh, and to be a means by which the people, sufficiently warned, could be saved. In 'Q' this was undoubtedly the core of both John's task and message.
- b) Having stated what John the Baptist was not, Chilton eventually notes that he was a "purifier". But a purifier in view of what purpose? Was it not among the prophet's tasks to purify the people? In essence, therefore, and in particular relation to John the Baptist: are purifying and prophecy mutually exclusive? That is not the evidence we get from 'Q'. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, was a prophet, baptizer, and purifier. These three, we will argue, constitute the programme of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts, and they are inseparable in the Lucan context.

There certainly is no taking away from 'Q' an exalted figure of John the Baptist as Elijah *redivivus* according to the text of Malachi 3:1; neither is there any removing from 'Q' a lingering – though unexpressed – doubt as to whether John may not

<sup>595</sup> C.A. Evans, "The Baptism of John in a Typological Context" in S.E. Porter & A.R. Cross, *Dimensions of Baptism*, 49. Evans cites J.A. Trumbower, "The Role of Malachi in the Career of John the Baptist" in C.A. Evans & W.R. Stegner (eds.), *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1994, 28-41.

<sup>596</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 53.



himself actually have been the awaited Messiah.<sup>597</sup> Fitzmyer certainly hints at this possibility,<sup>598</sup> as does Chilton too: "Jesus, of course, may have compared John to Elijah without thereby claiming he was the (or a) messiah".<sup>599</sup> There certainly is an impression created by statements of this nature that there may possibly have been some in the community of 'Q' (if not indeed the compilers of that material themselves) who thought that John was the messiah. That would explain to some degree the very categorical denial of John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel that he is *not* the messiah in order to leave the limelight to Jesus – "John confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ'" (John 1:20). In the same text, John the Baptist also declares publicly, when asked whether he were Elijah: ("I am not" – John 1:21a); and as to whether he were the prophet, his answer is short and clear: "No" (John 1:21b).

The belittling of John in Mark over against 'Q' is further evidenced in the description of John's baptism. In 'Q', John speaks of two baptisms: his baptism of water, and the baptism of "Spirit" and of "fire". In Mark, the same distinction is made, except that it is reformulated in such a way as to draw a contrast between the inferior water baptism of John against the superior baptism bestowed by the Spirit through the risen Jesus.

In 'Q' John is not only *not* subordinate to Jesus, but the two are occasionally placed in a common front against "[their] generation" which is presented as rejecting them both: "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon'. The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard'" (Luke 7:34, par. Matthew 11:16-19).

<sup>597</sup> So also C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 53.

<sup>598</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 672.

<sup>599</sup> B. Chilton, "John the Purifier", 4.

## 8.2.4 *John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel*<sup>600</sup>

### 8.2.4.1 *John is not the Light*

When John is first mentioned in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, it is emphasized that he was not the Light (John 1:6-8). He was sent from God to bear witness to the Logos. The reader is immediately introduced to a figure whose function is different to, and lower in estimation than that of a significant other (the 'Logos' or Light). This way of describing John the Baptist in terms of what he is *not* (either in his person, or in relation to Jesus) is given particular emphasis in the Fourth Gospel.

While the Fourth Gospel presents John the Baptist in ways that are similar to the Synoptic Gospels,<sup>601</sup> there are nonetheless significant differences. R.H. Lightfoot, for example, has noted the following: (a) John's activity as baptist is not given much emphasis in the Fourth Gospel; indeed, while John is presented as baptizing, he is never called a 'baptist' or 'baptizer'; (b) the Fourth Gospel's emphasis on Jesus' pre-existence in relation to John, because of which reason the One coming after John – in the succession of time – nonetheless ranks higher than him. For that reason, John does not accept any association with Elijah (John 1:20,21,25; 3:28): he is only a voice (John 1:23) that bears witness (John 1:7,15,19,32,34; 3:22-24) and prepares the way (John 1:23); (c) the Fourth Gospel is heir to a tradition which has John and Jesus exercising their ministries concurrently, during which time John lost some of his disciples to Jesus; (d) the Fourth Gospel says of John that he must decrease (John 3:30) while Jesus must increase (John 3:31). Similarly, John is presented as a lamp to show the way (John 5:35). However, a lamp is limited in that it is only serviceable at night: it loses its brilliance and is no longer needed when the sun rises (John 8:12). John's joy is complete (John 3:29) when he sees the influence of the Bridegroom to whom he has borne witness increase (John 4:1). As far as his own work is concerned, therefore, John can now depart in peace.<sup>602</sup> In addition to these differences we may

<sup>600</sup> More extensive discussions of the portrayal of John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel can be seen in W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 87-106; E. Bammel, "The Baptist in Early Christian Tradition", *NTS* 18 (1971-72), 109-113; J. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer: Interpretation-Geschichte-Wirkungsgeschichte*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1989, 186-216; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 70-77.

<sup>601</sup> For a general discussion on the relation of the Fourth Gospel to the Synoptic Gospels, see, among others, R.H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, 26-42; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 3-5; J. Marsh, *Saint John*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1968, 44-46.

<sup>602</sup> See R.H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, 66-68.

also note that in the Fourth Gospel the baptism of Jesus is not mentioned, and whereas in the Synoptic account of the baptism a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is the Son of God, in the Fourth Gospel this assertion is made by John the Baptist himself.

Some scholars have noted that, in general, John the Baptist is presented by the fourth evangelist in two phases: the one negative (John 1:19-21), and the other positive (John 1:6-8, 22-23). In the first phase, John is presented in terms of who and what he is not: he declares that he is not the Christ, not Elijah, and not a prophet.<sup>603</sup> In other words, this means that Jesus (in reference to whom John speaks) is, in his person, everything that John denies of himself. The Fourth Gospel differs from the Synoptic Gospels in its portrayal of John the Baptist in that while the Synoptics portray Jesus in the role of Elijah *redivivus*, in the Fourth Gospel John the Baptist rejects that role for himself. In the second phase, John is presented in terms of who and what he is: a witness, a voice crying in the wilderness, one who baptizes in water. While the Synoptic Gospels quote Isaiah 40:3 to explain John's activity in the wilderness, in the Fourth Gospel the quotation is put in the mouth of John himself. In both forms in which John the Baptist is presented, the fourth evangelist underlines John's subordinate position to the Coming One.

These are the essential strokes in the way in which the Fourth Gospel presents John the Baptist. It becomes immediately evident that the Fourth Evangelist was interested in the ministry of the 'Logos', while John is presented as one pointing to the arrival of the long-awaited redeemer.

#### 8.2.4.2 *John the Baptist and Jesus*

##### 8.2.4.2.1 *Putting John in his place*

In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist is encountered exclusively in relation to Jesus. While at one point the fourth evangelist appears to concur with the Synoptics in that

<sup>603</sup> R.E. Brown (*The Gospel According to John*, vol.1, Garden City, Doubleday, 1966, 46-50) sees in John's negative response to the question, "Who are you?", asked him by the "priests and Levites from Jerusalem" (1:19), as John's way of putting distance between himself and the common messianic expectations of his Jewish contemporaries. See further the interpretations of R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 87-88; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 1, New York, Crossroads, 1968, 288; E. Haenchen, 1984, vol. 1, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, 143. T.L. Brodie (*The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, 149) relates the style of the "triple repetition" (that is to say, "not the Christ...not Elijah...not the prophet") to classical Greek literary style.

John's ministry preceded the ministry of Jesus (John 1:15,30), at another point the evangelist indicates that the ministries of John and Jesus ran concurrently (John 3:22-23).

What strikes the reader of the Fourth Gospel is that John's subordinate position in relation to Jesus is highlighted right at the beginning:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. (1:6-8)

Equally striking is the fact that the author of the Fourth Gospel assumes that his readers are already acquainted with the tradition concerning John the Baptist: he is not introduced and characterized as in the Synoptic Gospels (for example, Mark 1:2-12 and parallel), neither are we told the content of his preaching. The position adopted by most scholars in relation to this early emphasis on John's inferiority to Jesus is that we have here an indication of the contemporary background of the writer of the Fourth Gospel. Basically, this is understood to be a background of polemic between the followers of John the Baptist and those of Jesus. Each side apparently upheld its leader as the Messiah. C.K. Barrett holds that the fourth evangelist highlights John's inferiority in order to "counteract an excessive veneration of the Baptist", for whom his followers possibly made "exaggerated claims...John emphasizes the Baptist's inferiority...with the intention of rebutting the assertions of his followers".<sup>604</sup> Bultmann sees in the fourth evangelist's sustained diminution of the person and function of John the Baptist a background in which

Debate centres on the question whether John or Jesus is the Messiah, and the Christian community in its struggle with the disciples of John can appeal to a ὁμολογία of John himself, that he did not wish to be the Messiah.<sup>605</sup>

B. Lindars sees all references to John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel<sup>606</sup> as basically reflecting Christian hostility against the followers of the Baptist:<sup>607</sup> "they proceed by

<sup>604</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, London, SPCK, 1958, 142.

<sup>605</sup> R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 88.

<sup>606</sup> See Jn. 1:6-8, 15, 19-36; 3:22-30; 5:30-36; 10:40-41.

<sup>607</sup> Regarding the followers of John the Baptist, we follow the description of B. Lindars (*The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1982): "Evidence for the continuation of the

way of contrast. Jesus is in every way *better* than the Baptist.”<sup>608</sup> Lindars suggests that at the heart of this hostility lies the rivalry between Christian and Baptist groups in the time of the fourth evangelist. Among other reasons, Lindars further suggests that this rivalry between the two groups arose as a result of “the embarrassing fact that Jesus had broken away from the Baptist, whom many regarded as the Messiah.”<sup>609</sup>

It is to be noted, however, that the ‘polemic’ that is perceived by Bultmann, Lindars and others in the fourth evangelist’s subordination of John the Baptist to Jesus has been strongly rebutted by other scholars.<sup>610</sup> W. Wink, for example, points out that it is “methodologically illegitimate” to view the fourth evangelist’s portrayal of John as a polemic against a Baptist sect which has an exalted image of John the Baptist over and above Jesus. If this line of reasoning (that is to say, the fourth evangelist writing about John in a polemical atmosphere) is followed, the conclusion, according to Wink, is that

John was worshipped as Elijah, prophet, messiah, the Light and the Life of men, a wonderworker, the pre-existent Logos through whom all things were made, indeed, even as the Word made flesh!

If such a ‘John-cult’ had in fact antedated the fourth Gospel, John would never have been conferred such an exalted role by the Evangelist.<sup>611</sup>

Wink further notes that instead of engaging in a polemical dispute between his Christian community and the followers of John the Baptist, “the Fourth Evangelist is

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Baptist’s following in later times may be seen in Acts. There was a small group of his disciples at Ephesus (Ac. 19.1-7), and Apollos of Alexandria was also a disciple (Ac. 18.25). Outside of the New Testament, the *Clementine Recognitions* (third century, but based on older writings) assert that various sects grew up to thwart the infant Church. These included the Baptist’s disciples, who claimed, on the authority of Mt. 11.11, that he was the Messiah. This is often taken to mean that there was a Baptist sect which made this claim in the second century; but this is not exactly what is said, and the assumption may be quite erroneous. But the possibility of the continuation of Baptist groups in Syria is supported by the Mandaean traditions, though the system does not identify him with the Man from Heaven, so that he still has a subordinate role. There is also patristic evidence that certain Gnostics traced their origins to Simon Magus and Dositheus, who had been followers of the Baptist in Samaria (the Mandaean texts know nothing of this). Out of these scraps of evidence the theory has been built up by Reitzenstein and others that there was a large and important Baptist movement, which could have been a serious threat to Christianity in Syria” (:60).

<sup>608</sup> B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 59.

<sup>609</sup> B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 60.

<sup>610</sup> Thus, for example, S.S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1978, 125-128; J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, 170-172; J. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 215-216; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet* 76-77.

<sup>611</sup> W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 102. Wink is here arguing against Bultmann’s position that asserts that the portrayal of John the Baptist by the fourth evangelist is a polemic against a Baptist sect that has developed a rival Christology. See Bultmann’s *The Gospel of John*, 17-18.



still in dialogue with these Baptists, countering their hyper-elevation of John and wooing them to the Christian faith".<sup>612</sup>

Following the 'anti-polemic' position, R.L. Webb proposes that the fourth evangelist's portrayal of John the Baptist be seen as

but one of the many points of contention in the debate between the Johannine church and the Jewish synagogue. Each group perhaps claiming John the Baptist in support of its own point of view: the synagogue arguing that John's ministry was prior to that of Jesus and that Jesus was John's disciple, to which the church countered by arguing that Jesus was prior because he was the Word and that John witnessed to Jesus' superiority. Whichever explanation is used, we many conclude that the Evangelist has effectively 'Christianized' John.<sup>613</sup>

At the end of his work on the portrayal of John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel, M. Dibelius concludes:

Ja, die Christen gingen in der Christianisierung der Johanneserzählungen noch weiter: da die Vorläuferstellung des Täufers die Würde des Herrn gefährdete, wurde Johannes neben Jesus gestellt, der Täufer ward zum 'Freunde', der Vorläufer zum 'Zeugen', der Prophet zum Heiligen.<sup>614</sup>

#### 8.2.4.2.2 *John the Baptist Identifies Jesus*

As noted above, the fourth evangelist does not narrate the baptism of Jesus, as the Synoptic Gospels do. Indeed, Jesus himself is introduced with an abruptness that appears to be particular to John. As in the way in which John the Baptist was presented earlier on, there seems to be an assumption on the part of the author of the Fourth Gospel that his readers are already acquainted with the tradition concerning Jesus' earliest encounter with John. Certainly, John 1:26 ("but standing among you – unknown to you – is one who is coming after me") appears to lend support to the tradition that Jesus had been in the crowd around John when the priests and Levites interrogated John about his identity and his baptizing activity.<sup>615</sup>

<sup>612</sup> W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 105.

<sup>613</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 77.

<sup>614</sup> M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911, 143.

<sup>615</sup> So also B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 108.

Though the reference to the descent of the Holy Spirit and the heavenly voice (John 1:32-33) are not explicitly placed in the context of a baptismal scene, this seems to be implied by the explanatory note in John 1:28: "This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing", which locates the place of the encounter between John and Jesus: "The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him..." While in Mark the Spirit and the dove appear to be a subjective experience of Jesus, and in Matthew and Luke these are described as if they were public phenomena, the fourth evangelist is quite explicit: It was John the Baptist who saw the Spirit descend; it was to him the words from heaven were directed. This is in keeping with the style of the fourth evangelist, who stresses from the very beginning that John is a 'witness' (John 1:6-8).

In describing Jesus, John understands him to be the "Lamb of God", he who "takes away the sin of the world", the one who existed before John, the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit, and therefore the "Chosen One of God" (John 1:29-35). John adds that he himself did not know Jesus, though his "purpose in coming to baptize with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). It was only when he saw the Spirit come down on Jesus that John recognized him for who and what he was: the "Chosen One of God" (John 1:34). The strand woven throughout this narrative, as indeed throughout the Fourth Gospel in respect of John the Baptist is that he is subordinate to Jesus. In the phrase "the Chosen One of God" the author of the Fourth Gospel wishes to clarify the issue regarding the question of the superiority of Jesus beyond all doubt for his audience. This is especially true if, as has been noted by some scholars, the relation between John and Jesus is related by the author of the Fourth Gospel from a background of polemic between the followers of Jesus and the followers of John regarding which of the two was the messiah.

In John 1:33 John the Baptist admits his own prior ignorance of Jesus ("I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"). Some scholars suggest that this verse be read in the context of 1:26b ("Among you stands one whom you do not know"). Following closely on W. Wink, R.L. Webb suggests that the combination of the two texts

only the bridegroom's friend, John expresses joy at Jesus' ministry...John therefore concludes, 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (3:30).<sup>617</sup>

While Jesus is portrayed again in John 4:1-3 as engaged in a baptizing ministry and "making and baptizing more disciples than John" (John 4:1), a clumsily inserted explanatory note that interrupts the flow of the narrative – "though in fact it was his disciples who baptized, not Jesus himself" – attempts a modification of the statements made in John 3:22-26 and John 4:1 by indicating that Jesus himself did not actually baptize, only his disciples.

Webb develops the 'competition' theme when, in commenting on the dispute between John's disciples and "a Jew" about purification (John 3:25), he notes that

it may be reasonably concluded that the debate concerning purification resulted from a difference between the teaching that John had given to his disciples and that which was now being propounded by Jesus to his own disciples.<sup>618</sup>

Be that as it may, the Fourth Gospel portrays the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus running parallel to each other. Whether or not there was any rivalry between the two is not agreed upon by scholars.

#### 8.2.4.3 *John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel: A Summary*

A key word that is used in the Fourth Gospel in relation to John the Baptist is the word 'witness'. The word is repeatedly used to describe the person and ministry of John, and even in those cases where the word 'witness' is not explicitly used, the sense of witnessing is nevertheless still evident. The μάρτυρ- word group is used in connection with John the Baptist in John 1:7 (twice), 8, 15, 32, 34; 3:26, 32 (twice), 33; 5:33, 34, 36. The texts that carry the idea of witnessing, without the use of the μάρτυρ- word group, are John 1:35-37; 3:27-30; 10:41.

In the Fourth Gospel, the significance of John the Baptist is placed in the overall purpose of the evangelist, namely in order "that you may come to believe that Jesus is

<sup>617</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 74-75.

<sup>618</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 74-75, n.82.

the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name". The fourth evangelist does this by portraying John the Baptist as one who witnesses to Jesus so that others might have faith in Jesus (John 1:7; 10:42). The people who follow Jesus acknowledge that everything John said about Jesus was true (John 10:41 – "Many came to him, and they were saying, 'John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true'"), and as a result many believed in Jesus (John 10:42 – "And many believed in him there"). In other words, through John's witness, and through a realization on the people's part that John's witness is true, many are led to faith in Jesus. According to W. Wink, this fact is significant for our understanding of the fourth evangelist's interpretation of the role of John the Baptist:

[John is presented as] the normative image of the Christian preacher, apostle and missionary, the perfect prototype of the true evangelist, whose goal is self-effacement before Christ...His whole function is to 'witness', that others might believe through him.<sup>619</sup>

### ***8.3 John the Baptist in Extra-Canonical Literature***

#### ***8.3.1 Introduction***

While the reader of the New Testament encounters John the Baptist primarily through the canonical Gospels, there are other writings outside the New Testament corpus that may profitably be used in learning more about John. Among these extra-biblical writings are the influential references to John the Baptist found in the writings of the famous Jewish historian and apologist Flavius Josephus, as well as in the extra-canonical writings of some early Christians. It is to these writings that we now turn to augment whatever insights the New Testament has to offer about John the Baptist.

#### ***8.3.2 John the Baptist in Extra-Canonical Gospels***

The term 'extra-canonical literature' covers a wide spectrum of ancient writings covering a long span of time and a wide range of topics. It is therefore necessary to delimit the scope of our treatment of this body of literature. In the first place, by 'extra-canonical literature' we refer to early Christian writings relatively contemporaneous with the canonical New Testament writings, dealing with the early Christians' interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. However,

<sup>619</sup> W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 105. See also on page 106.

even this more specific body of literature is a vast one in extent and in temporal sequence. Faced with this broad field of material, where does one begin, and where does one end? And on what basis is a decision to be made? Obviously, the most important consideration in our choice of the material to be studied rests on whether the material deals at all with the subject of our study, namely John the Baptist. However, a quick look at the references in the relevant literature shows that John the Baptist does feature to a greater or lesser extent, which makes it necessary for us to further narrow down the area of our study. In this process we are guided by R.L. Webb who limits his survey on John the Baptist in the extra-canonical Gospels "to those Gospels which may be dated to the middle of the second century CE or before".<sup>620</sup> We will therefore limit our survey to the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the *Gospel of the Nazareans*, and the *Protevangelium of James*. We are aware that, in addition to the Gospels we have indicated, John the Baptist is mentioned also in the Gnostic writings found in the Nag Hammadi Library and in *Pistis Sophia*, but since no substantial additional information is offered on John the Baptist in these writings, we do not include them in our brief survey.<sup>621</sup>

### 8.3.2.1 *John the Baptist in the Gospel of Thomas*<sup>622</sup>

The *Gospel of Thomas* (dated around the first half of the Second Century CE) contains little material that is narrative in nature. It focuses on sayings of Jesus, and the few references to John the Baptist are contained in the logia of Jesus. There is one direct reference to John in this Gospel, though there are a number of other verses (for example in 11a, 47, 51, 52, 78, 104)<sup>623</sup> that, when read from a knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels, would appear to be an indirect reference to John.

<sup>620</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 77.

<sup>621</sup> The reader is referred to R.L. Webb's survey and helpful bibliographical references in his work cited above, particularly to footnote 93 on page 78.

<sup>622</sup> For a detailed study, translation, and commentary of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see R. Valantasis, (*The Gospel of Thomas*, London, Routledge, 1997), and for an introductory discussion see J.M. Robinson, "On Bridging the Gulf from Q to the Gospel of Thomas (or Vice Versa)", in C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson (eds.), *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1986, 127-175. See also R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 78-81.

<sup>623</sup> About which, see R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 79-81.



*The Gospel of the Ebionites 1*

It came to pass in the days of Herod the king of Judaea, when Caiaphas was high priest, that there came one, John by name, and baptized with the baptism of repentance in the river Jordan. It was said of him that he was of the lineage of Aaron the priest, a son of Zachaias and Elisabeth; and all went out to him. (As quoted in *Haer.* 30.13.6)

*The Gospel of the Ebionites 2*

It came to pass that John was baptising; and there went out to him Pharisees and were baptized, and all Jerusalem. And John had a garment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins, and his food, as it saith, was wild honey, the taste of which was that of manna, as a cake dipped in oil. (As quoted in *Haer.* 30.13.4-5)

*The Gospel of the Ebionites 3*

When the people were baptised, Jesus also came and was baptised by John. And as he came up from the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that descended and entered into him. And a voice sounded from heaven that said: Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased. And again: I have this day begotten thee. And immediately a great light shone round about the place. When John saw this, it saith, he saith unto him: Who art thou, Lord? And again a voice from heaven rang out to him: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. And then, it saith, John fell down before him and said: I beseech thee, Lord baptize thou me. But he prevented him and said: Suffer it; for thus it is fitting that everything should be fulfilled. (As quoted in *Haer.* 30.13.7-8)

The *Gospel of the Ebionites* (in its extant fragments) contains no independent traditions about Jesus and the people associated with him. The picture portraying John the Baptist in this Gospel focuses upon his baptizing ministry, which is described in terms essentially no different from the way John is portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels. In brief, John the Baptist is portrayed in the *Gospel of the Ebionites* as a priest who lives in the wilderness, where he administers a baptism of

repentance. Among the many people who come to him for baptism is Jesus. There is no tradition of John as a preacher or a prophet. However, because of the fragmentary nature of the extant text of this Gospel, it is hard to ascertain whether or not the Gospel's portrayal of John the Baptist gives us an accurate image of the man, or whether Epiphanius' choice of quotations from the *Gospel of the Ebionites* in his *Haereses* was not tendentious.

### 8.3.2.3. *John the Baptist in the Gospel of the Nazareans*<sup>629</sup>

The *Gospel of the Nazareans*, believed to be either an Aramaic or Syriac translation and expansion of the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>630</sup> and dated around the first half of the Second Century CE, appears to be addressing a Christological question or dispute in its reference to John the Baptist. The one extant text that refers directly to John the Baptist (*Gos. Naz.* 2) seems to indicate that the baptism of Jesus by John posed a difficulty for some sections of the Christian community. There appear to have been two areas of contention: (1) the suggestion that Jesus was a disciple of John, which placed Jesus in an inferior position in respect of John, and (2) the fact that if Jesus received the baptism of John, which was a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, then the belief in Jesus' sinlessness was placed in question.

#### *Gospel of the Nazareans 2*

Behold, the mother of the Lord and his brethren said to him: John the Baptist baptises unto the remission of sins, let us go and be baptized by him. But he said to them: Wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless what I have said is ignorance.

This text appears to deal decisively with the question of Jesus' condition regarding sin: Jesus denies any need for baptism, precisely because he is without sin, or so the text gives the reader to understand.

<sup>629</sup> For an introduction to, and the text of the *Gospel of the Nazareans*, see W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, 154-165. See also R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 83, n.106.

<sup>630</sup> See R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 83.

### 8.3.2.4. *John the Baptist in the Protevangelium of James*<sup>631</sup>

Dated to the second half of the Second Century, the *Protevangelium of James* is in reality an account of the miraculous birth of Mary.<sup>632</sup> Only in chapters 12.2 and 22-24 do we get an account of the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus *in embryo*, of the murder of Zechariah, identified as the father of John the Baptist, and of how Elizabeth, the mother of John, sought refuge in a mountain to protect her son from the evil intentions of Herod.

#### *Protevangelium of James 12:2*

And Mary rejoiced, and went to Elizabeth her kinswoman, and knocked on the door. When Elizabeth heard it, she put down the scarlet, and ran to the door and opened it, and when she saw Mary, she blessed her and said: 'Whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, that which is in me leaped and blessed thee.'

#### *Protevangelium of James 22:3*

But Elizabeth, when she heard that John was sought for, took him and went up into the hill-country. And she looked around to see where she could hide him, and there was no hiding-place. And Elizabeth groaned aloud and said: 'O mountain of God, receive me, a mother, with my child.' For Elizabeth could not go up further for fear. And immediately the mountain was rent asunder and received her. And that mountain made a light to gleam for her; for an angel of the Lord was with them and protected them.

#### *Protevangelium of James 23:1*

Now Herod was searching for John, and sent officers to Zacharias at the altar to ask him: 'Where have you hidden your son?' And he answered and said to them: 'I am a minister of God and attend continually upon his Temple. How should I know where my son is?'

#### *Protevangelium of James 23:2*

And the officers departed and told all this to Herod. Then Herod was angry and said: 'Is his son to be king of Israel?'

<sup>631</sup> For introduction and text, see W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, 421-439, and R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 83-84. See especially Webb's page 84, n.108.

<sup>632</sup> About which, and about the designation 'Protevangelium', as well as the reference to James, see W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, 423.

And he sent the officers to him again with the command: 'Tell the truth. Where is your son? You know that your blood is under my hand.' And the officers departed and told him all this.

*Protevangelium of James 23.3*

And Zacharias said: 'I am a martyr of God. Take my blood! But my spirit the Lord will receive, for you shed innocent blood in the forecourt of the Temple of the Lord.' And about the dawning of the day Zacharias was slain. And the children of Israel did not know that he had been slain.

Though John's name occurs more frequently in the *Protevangelium of James* than in the other extra-canonical Gospels, the emphasis is not on himself but, especially in the infancy narrative (which, however, does not relate the circumstances of his conception nor of his birth), on his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. In this Gospel the contact between John and Jesus is indirect: John leaps in his mother's womb when Mary visits Elizabeth. Apart from this incident, there is no further 'contact' or relationship between John and Jesus, nor is there any indication of a possible future relationship between them. As R.L. Webb rightly observes, in the *Protevangelium of James* John is "not a baptizer, nor is he really anything else".<sup>633</sup>

### 8.3.2.5. Conclusion

Taken together, the extra-canonical Gospels do not provide the same quantity of information as do the canonical Gospels. While the canonical Gospels offer some description of John himself in addition to a fuller treatment of the relationship between him and Jesus, the extra-canonical Gospels (with the possible exception of the *Protevangelium of James*) appear to focus more exclusively upon the relationship between John and Jesus. R.L. Webb briefly summarizes the portrayal of John the Baptist in the extra-canonical Gospels thus:

The *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Nazareans* only contain sayings of Jesus about John, and they are concerned with christological issues. The *Gospel of the Ebionites* does describe John and his baptizing ministry, but it is evidently dependent upon the canonical Gospels for this material, and it has been shaped to be consistent with the Ebionite lifestyle. The *Protevangelium of James* on the other hand appears

<sup>633</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 84.

to be largely independent of the canonical Gospels, but John has no role explicitly attributed to him.<sup>634</sup>

### 8.3.3 *John the Baptist in Josephus*

#### 8.3.3.1 *The Text of Antiquities xviii.116-119*

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour. When others too joined the crowds about him because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod's suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus, the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod's army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod.

#### 8.3.3.2 *The Context of Antiquities xviii.116-119*<sup>635</sup>

Josephus' reference to John the Baptist is the most extensive outside of the canonical Gospels. This is significant, regardless of scholars' views about the reliability or otherwise of Josephus as a historian (about which see below).

Because of the many questions regarding the reliability of Josephus' works as a historical source for the study of the period of Jewish history about which he writes, it is necessary that before we take any position in respect of the reliability or otherwise of what he writes about John, "surnamed the Baptist", we begin by gaining an insight into the context within which Josephus writes about John.

Josephus' writing about John is incidental to Josephus' treatment of Herod Antipas. At the death of Herod the Great, the territory he had ruled was divided between his three sons: Agrippa inherited Judaea, to Antipas was allotted Galilee and Peraea, while Antipas' half-brother Philip received the rest. For political motives, Antipas

<sup>634</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 84-85.

<sup>635</sup> See R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 31-41, for an analysis of the text and literary style of *Ant.* xviii.116-119, as well as of its socio-historical context.



married the daughter of Aretas, the Nabatean king. In Antipas' thinking, this marriage would safeguard his land against Nabatean inroads into his territory, the two territories having had border disputes along their common frontier for decades.

On a visit to his half-brother Philip, Antipas fell in love with Herodias, Philip's wife. As Antipas was on his way to Rome at that time, he arranged with Herodias that he would marry her when he came back from Rome, after having first divorced his wife, Aretas' daughter. Unfortunately this plan became known to Aretas' daughter, who then went back to her father and revealed to him the intentions of Antipas and Herodias. This precipitated a war between Antipas and Aretas, during which Antipas' army was decisively defeated by Aretas' forces. The defeat was interpreted by many Jews, among them Josephus, as divine vengeance visited on Antipas for his killing of John the Baptist, whom many considered to be a prophet. That the people's sympathies lay with John the Baptist is indicated by Josephus' affirmation of the people's interpretation of Antipas' defeat as a "just vengeance".

John's name features in this description of Antipas' marital and military misfortunes because John was disgusted at the behaviour of Antipas and Herodias. John strongly condemned their marriage, and because of this John incurred the wrath of Herodias, who henceforth began to think of ways by which she might rid herself of the embarrassment that John was causing her by his public condemnation of her union with Antipas. The way by which Herodias achieved her purpose is described in the canonical Gospels (Mark 6:14-29; Matthew 14:1-12).

Though broadly similar to the Gospel account regarding the death of John the Baptist, Josephus' description of the circumstances leading to this event differs from that of the Gospels on a few interesting points. While the Gospel writers describe John as being imprisoned (without naming where this happened) and killed for religious/ethical reasons (his condemnation of what was seen as an incestuous relationship with his brother's wife), Josephus, on the other hand, states that John was put to death because of Herod's fear of political unrest. According to Josephus, John the Baptist had a great influence with the people ("they were aroused to the highest

degree by his sermons...it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did"<sup>636</sup>). When John extended his activities to Peraea (on the East-bank of the Jordan – Jn. 1:28; 3:26; 10:40) Antipas had him arrested. According to Josephus, this was at Machaerus, a fortress east of the Dead Sea. It appears, from Josephus' description, that John was executed soon after his imprisonment. The Gospels, however, appear to indicate that Antipas had John kept in prison for an indefinite period, apparently uncertain what to do with him since Antipas did not want John killed.<sup>637</sup> It was Herodias who, through her instruction to her daughter, precipitated a decision by requesting John's head on a dish.

The context within which Josephus sets the description of John the Baptist is a socio-political one. The intrigues within the households of Antipas and his half-brother Philip, Aretas' not forgetting that Antipas had repudiated his daughter, the border dispute between the Nabataeans and Herod Antipas, and eventually the destruction visited on Antipas' army by the Nabataeans, as well as Herod's own fear of the great influence that John had over the people (a fear that led Herod to the politically expedient decision that "it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising") – all these are the background issues behind Josephus' description of John the Baptist, and of the circumstances leading to John's execution.

### **8.3.3.3 *John the Baptist in Antiquities xviii.116-119***

From Josephus' account, it is possible to draw the following evaluation of John the Baptist:

Firstly, Josephus subscribes to the public perception of John the Baptist as "a good man". Josephus therefore believes that the public's interpretation of Herod's military reverses as divine vengeance was not only a correct interpretation, but that this vengeance was "certainly a just vengeance".

<sup>636</sup> *Ant.* xviii.118.

<sup>637</sup> Mark 6:20 describes Herod's ambiguous position regarding John: "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him." Matthew 14:5 adds another element: "Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet."

Secondly, we also gather from Josephus' description that John the Baptist was as popular as he was influential with the people. He attracted crowds by his baptism and exhortation to "the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God". The crowds were so taken up by John that "they were aroused to the highest degree". This frightened Herod, not least because the crowds looked "as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did". John's ability to attract crowds to himself, and the possibility that his message might generate political and social unrest and lead to sedition<sup>638</sup> alarmed Herod and made him determined to get rid of John.

Thirdly, John practised baptism as a way of purification of the body, since the soul was already cleansed by repentance and forgiveness of sin. Repentance and forgiveness were pre-requisites for baptism, not a result of baptism, or, in the words of R.L. Webb:

according to Josephus, the essence of John's message was an ethical call to practise a righteous lifestyle which would cleanse the soul by receiving pardon for sins, and then to perform a baptism which would purify the body. The response to John's ethical demand appears to be a condition for John's baptism.<sup>639</sup>

#### **8.3.3.4. *An Assessment of Josephus as a Historian***

Though Josephus presents us with the longest portrayal of John the Baptist outside of the Gospels, many are the questions that have been raised relative to Josephus' trustworthiness as a historian. How reliable, in effect, is Josephus as a historian in general, and as a portrayer of John the Baptist in particular? The question arises because Josephus has been noted for abusing his sources, for being an apologist for Judaism (and for himself!), and thus for being prejudiced in his viewpoint, for being confused and contradictory, and for his writings having been tampered with by early Christians. While it is not within the scope of this investigation to deal in depth with the question of Josephus' reliability, we nonetheless make the following observations:

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<sup>638</sup> Though John preached a religious and ethical message according to the Gospels, some scholars believe "it is highly probable that the real motive for the imprisonment of the Baptist by Antipas was, as Josephus states, fear of political unrest...For at that time the mass of the people were unable to differentiate between their religious and political hopes", thus E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1, 346.

<sup>639</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 35.

It is important to understand Josephus' writings within the context of history-writing in Hellenistic-Roman times. Studies undertaken with this end in view have largely tended to be in sympathy with Josephus and, while noting his weaknesses, have tended to absolve him from having as his intention a deliberately misleading presentation of the facts. Thus, for example, S.J.D. Cohen, among others,<sup>640</sup> attempts to explain how Josephus follows the style used by Hellenistic-Roman historians in the use of his sources:

An author was expected to take some liberties with his source. He could freely invent details to increase the color and dramatic interest of the account. He was expected to recast the narrative, to place his own stamp upon it, to use the material for his own purposes, to create something new. But on the whole he was faithful to the content and sequence of the original...<sup>641</sup>

In general, and not only with respect to Josephus' use of his sources but also to his overall 'historical' writing, Cohen concludes that, in Josephus' writing,

With the revision of language some revision of content is inevitable. Details are added, omitted, or changed...Although his fondness for the dramatic, pathetic, erotic, and the exaggerated, is evident throughout, as a rule Josephus remains fairly close to his original. Even when he modifies the source to suit a certain aim he still reproduces the essence of the story. Most important, he does not engage in the free invention of episodes...In all these points Josephus followed standard Greek practice.<sup>642</sup>

What is immediately clear from the context within which Josephus talks of John the Baptist is that the account about John is actually 'tangential' to Josephus' concern, which is to describe the misfortunes of the Herodian family. John is referred to almost as an aside – important, perhaps, but an aside nonetheless. Josephus holds a perception common to the generality of the Jewish populace regarding this "good man". Having said this, however, it is necessary not to ignore altogether Josephus'

<sup>640</sup> Not few are the scholars who hold to the essential historical reliability of Josephus' accounts. Among them we cite the following who evaluate Josephus positively as a historian: H.-St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian*, New York, Ktav, 1967, 1-22; G.F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, vol. 1, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1946, 208-210; R.J.H. Shutt, 1961, *Studies in Josephus*, London, SPCK, 117-27; G.A. Williamson, *The World of Josephus*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1964, 274-297; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1, 43-63; D.M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution: 6-74 CE: A Political History Based on the Writings of Josephus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976, 11-14; T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society*, London, Duckworth, 1983, 4-7, 197-201; P. Bilde, *Flavius Josephus, between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works, and their Importance*, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1988, 173-206.

<sup>641</sup> S.J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian*, Leiden, Brill, 1979, 31.

<sup>642</sup> S.J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome*, 233.

weaknesses or particular tendencies in the way he presents his 'history'. While taking note of these, we may, nevertheless, accept the nuanced position of R.L. Webb who advises that

we may reasonably conclude that Josephus may be employed as a historical source, but with caution...we may take the description of John to be a relatively objective account by Josephus within the parameters of Greco-Roman historiography.<sup>643</sup>

C. Scobie strikes a similar note of caution when, after a lengthy attempt at showing Josephus in positive light he concludes:

Above all, [Josephus] was clearly guilty both of distorting and omitting much material in order to serve the two main purposes of his writings, namely, to defend his own life and conduct (which at times left much to be desired), and to defend the Jewish people, raising them in the estimation of the Roman world...There are therefore no grounds for doubting most of what Josephus tells us, but we must regard it as a one-sided account; it is largely the truth, but by no means the whole truth.<sup>644</sup>

#### **8.4 Sources on John the Baptist: A Conclusion**

This brief overview of our primary sources for John the Baptist reveals one clear picture. There is nowhere in the works reviewed an interest shown in John for his own sake. Whenever we encounter him in the canonical or extra-canonical Gospels, it is immediately obvious that the interest of the extant sources lies in the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. According to the Synoptic Gospels, John the Baptist and Jesus come into contact only at the time of the baptism of Jesus, and even then it is not quite sure whether in fact the two recognize each other. According to the Synoptic traditions, Jesus only began his ministry after the arrest of John.<sup>645</sup> It is only the Fourth Gospel that has retained a tradition of a greater contact between Jesus and John,<sup>646</sup> and, unlike the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel has a tradition of the ministry of the two running concurrently and, in fact, some of the disciples of John leave him and join the followers of Jesus.<sup>647</sup> Mark and Matthew are also in agreement in their regarding John the Baptist as Elijah *redivivus*. The author of Luke-Acts appears to be more cautious on this point, for he uses Elijah typology

<sup>643</sup> R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 42.

<sup>644</sup> C. Scobie *John the Baptist*, 18-19.

<sup>645</sup> Mark 1:14; Matthew 4:12. This is denied by the author of the Fourth Gospel in John 3:24.

<sup>646</sup> John 3:22-30.

<sup>647</sup> For example, John 1:43-2:22 presents Jesus as ministering in Galilee at the same time that John was ministering in Judea. Jesus was already engaged in his ministry prior to the imprisonment of John.



for both John and Jesus. The Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, has John the Baptist deny the notion that he might be Elijah *redivivus*.<sup>648</sup>

Also striking in the Gospels' treatment of John the Baptist is the stress (at times excessive) on John's subordination to Jesus. As C. Scobie says in support of John:

We are constantly being reminded of his inferiority to Jesus, but the fact that he continued his ministry after the baptism of Jesus, and the fact that when in prison he appears not yet to have decided whether Jesus was the Coming One or not suggest that he was in fact more of an independent religious figure than the New Testament allows.<sup>649</sup>

Scobie summarizes the Gospels' treatment of John the Baptist by noting that 'Q', which contains the greatest proportion of material on John, has also the highest estimate of him. Mark, though he has less to tell about John the Baptist than 'Q' is valuable in that he has preserved a number of 'factual' details and is on the whole unbiased in his presentation of John. Scobie notes that Matthew and Luke introduce bias against John, possibly due to the particular interests of their communities, which do not lie with John. Scobie then observes that the Fourth Gospel is by far the most biased against John.<sup>650</sup> It must be noted, however, that Scobie presents only one aspect, for it is clear that the Fourth Gospel has a high valuation of John's testimony about Jesus.

As we have already noted above, Josephus' reference to John the Baptist in *Antiquities* 18 is presented in the course of Josephus' narrative regarding the (mis)fortunes of Herod's family, where the defeat of Herod's army by Aretas is said by the Jews to be divine punishment visited on Herod for his murder of John the Baptist, "a good man".

All in all, therefore, our sources do not, for reasons that would take us too far out of our way to go into in detail, show any particular interest in John the Baptist in and of himself as an independent individual. The chief interests of our sources lie elsewhere, and, in the current state of research, we have to be satisfied with a very incomplete

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<sup>648</sup> John 1:21.

<sup>649</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 15-16.

<sup>650</sup> See C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 16-17.

picture of John the Baptist from which, however, very important personal and theological data may be gleaned. It is our purpose, therefore, within the scope of Luke-Acts (which has the most extensive treatment of John the Baptist within the New Testament), to put together an image of the person and ministry of John the Baptist that the author of Luke-Acts intended to project for his readers.

## **9. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN LUKE-ACTS**

### **9.1 *Introduction***

In this section of our study we undertake a closer investigation of the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts. After a presentation of all the texts in both the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in which John is mentioned or referred to, we will identify and study at some depth a few texts that we have identified as being of particular relevance to the current investigation. We have noted earlier in the general introduction to this study that John is primarily portrayed in Luke-Acts in terms of a prophet and witness who plays a unique role in the *Heilsgeschichte*, and is further presented as a role model of how to live out the Christian calling and the proclamation of the good news to all people. Further, John the Baptist represents for the author of Luke-Acts the ideal qualities of prophet and witness which the author seeks to inculcate in his own audience for their emulation in living out their Christian calling and in carrying out their mandate to proclaim the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth.



### 9.3 Preliminary Remarks

There are a number of characters who play significant roles in the narrative of Luke-Acts, for example Jesus, the Twelve, the Holy Spirit, Peter, Paul, "the Jews" as a collective personality, and likewise "the Gentiles". Peter and Paul feature so prominently that some scholars have used their role in the narrative as a means of determining the overall structure of Acts. For example, it is held by some of these scholars that structurally and from a narrative point of view, Acts is clearly made up of two main sections: chapters 1 to 13, in which Peter is said to be the main protagonist, and chapters 14 to 28, in which the central figure is said to be Paul.<sup>651</sup>

The name John (with reference to the Baptist) appears some ten times in the Third Gospel, and a further ten times in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the most frequent occurrence of this name in the books of the New Testament. Whereas John the Baptist's name occurs only four times in Mark (one of the sources used by the author of Luke-Acts), and nine times in Matthew, it immediately becomes evident that the author of Luke-Acts attaches some significance to John the Baptist.

Our author is the only one to cover John's life from conception to his ministry and mission, to his death, and even to John's continuing influence in the earliest history of Christianity after his death. In seeking to understand John's role in Luke-Acts it is not possible to ignore the birth narrative in Luke 1-2,<sup>652</sup> for this is "a section of the text containing preliminary, programmatic information that the reader must have to construct the character of the Baptist in the remainder of the story".<sup>653</sup>

The manner in which John's childhood and growing up are related makes it "obvious that we are not to focus on John as a child, but to garner information that aids us in understanding what John *will* be when grown up".<sup>654</sup> The question that is asked about John in Luke 1:66 ("What then will this child be?") is also intended by the author of Luke-Acts to occupy the mind of the reader in such a way that the reader's curiosity becomes heightened in anticipation of the flowering of John's career and its further

<sup>651</sup> So, for example, C.H. Talbert, *Reading Acts*, 15-16, and J.R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1990.

<sup>652</sup> Pace Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 9.

<sup>653</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 60.

<sup>654</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 62.

development as this is recounted from Luke 3 onwards. The reader's future encounters with John, and the description of his influence from Alexandria to Ephesus are, as such, no longer a great surprise to the reader who has, by this time, already come to expect great things of John. After all, the angel had foretold that John would be "great before the Lord...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit...he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:14-17).

In Mark, Matthew, and John, the Baptist is almost always encountered within a context in which the authors are making some comment about Jesus of Nazareth. The Baptist is generally presented in these sources not so much as a subject of direct interest in his person, but only in relation to, and comparison with Jesus, to whom John is clearly subordinate.<sup>655</sup>

The relationship between John and Jesus is, as we shall see shortly, given a high profile throughout Luke-Acts. Indeed, the author even establishes a close (if not a blood) relationship between them (Luke 1:36-56) – though C. Scobie notes that the Greek word συγγενής (translated as 'kinswoman') could also simply mean that Mary and Elizabeth belonged to the same tribe,<sup>656</sup> and throughout, the narrative of Luke-Acts is inter-woven with episodes in which the continuity between the ministries of John and Jesus is firmly established.

John the Baptist is accorded a major role in Luke-Acts. The reader is thus not surprised when Luke in his Gospel has Jesus extend to John the highest accolade ever bestowed on any human being: "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28). Also, as will be noted later in this study, unlike Mark (6:14-29) and Matthew (14:1-12), Luke does not narrate the feast in Herod's palace that set in motion the process leading to the death of John according to the two former Gospels. Instead, Luke merely glosses over John's death (Luke 9:7-9), as if to show that he is not interested in a dead John. Luke is clearly interested in a John who is very much alive, and whose influence reaches far beyond the physical grave, and therefore he, as it were, keeps John alive in the memory of his readers by constantly

<sup>655</sup> See Mark 1:7-8; Matthew 3:11-12; 13-15; John 1:24-27, 29-34; 3:28-30.

<sup>656</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 56.



referring to him throughout the Third Gospel and well into Acts (chapter 19). This interest in John the Baptist is also seen in the geographic extension of knowledge about him, from Alexandria to Ephesus. It is as though Luke's story (in which the theme of the universality of salvation is prominent) could not be easily told without the pivotal role of John the Baptist. Luke's narrative begins with John the Baptist (Luke 1-2) and, in so far as it ends on a 'fulfillment-of-prophecy' note (Acts 28:28), it can be said to end on a feature that is directly associated with the prophetic dimension of John's message.

This last assertion needs some explanation. As will be shown later in the development of this study, missionary and witnessing activity as well as Christian prophetic activity (especially in Acts) is associated with John's earlier ministry and proclamation. From the start, John proclaimed the good news. In Luke 3:18 the verb εὐηγγελίζετο ("preached the good news") is used of John's ministry. In Luke 16:16 the same verb is used again to describe John's proclamation. Later, in Acts, it is the spreading of the good news of salvation that is at the heart of the ministry of the evangelizers and witnesses.

We will see, further, how, during his ministry, John already began to indicate a new understanding of the concept 'the children of Abraham' (Luke 3:8) that was open to non-Jews. John showed how descent from Abraham was no longer a guarantee for salvation, but that bearing 'fruits that befit repentance' (Luke 3:8) was the new condition for salvation, and this condition was valid for all people. In the same way, it was one of the key aspects of Paul's ministry after that of John to show that circumcision and the Law (synonymous in the Jewish tradition with being 'children of Abraham') were no longer a qualification for salvation, but that God saves anyone who believes, whether they be Jew or Gentile. We have already noted the significance of John's indefinite reference to "*Bear fruits that befit repentance...God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham...every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...the people were in expectation...*" (Luke 3:7-15).<sup>657</sup> It is thus basically to John the Baptist's inclusive understanding of salvation that the mind of the reader of Luke-Acts is drawn upon

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<sup>657</sup> Our italics.

hearing Paul saying at the close of Acts: "Let it be known to you then, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, they will listen" (Acts 28:28). The use of the indeterminate phrase  $\pi\alpha\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\nu\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\delta\rho\omicron\nu$  ("every tree") signifies a broader and inclusive reference to the reality described. It denotes generality, rather than specificity. The influence of John is thus shown in its broadest extent from the opening of the Third Gospel to the closure of Acts. Our earlier assertion that the story of Luke-Acts and the theme of the new dispensation, which is marked by the salvation of all people, cannot easily be told without reference to John the Baptist is given some confirmation by this thematic *inclusio*. One text about John (Luke 1:76-77) is placed at the beginning of Luke-Acts, while another text containing an idea that may theoretically be linked with John the Baptist (Acts 28:28; cf. Luke 3:5) is found at the end of Luke-Acts, thus bracketing the overall narrative context of Luke-Acts. This conscious elevation of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts may be indicated thus:

<b>OPENING OF LUKE-ACTS</b>		<b>CLOSURE OF LUKE-ACTS</b>
<b>JOHN AND THE SALVATION OF ISRAEL</b>	<b>MAIN BODY OF THE NARRATIVE OF LUKE-ACTS</b>	<b>[JOHN AND] THE SALVATION OF THE GENTILES</b>
"You [John] will go before the Lord...to give knowledge of salvation to his people".	◆ <b>MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, JESUS, AND THE EARLY CHURCH</b>	"Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles".
<b>Luke 1:76-77</b> (Also 1:5-25, 39-80; 3:8)		<b>Acts 28:28</b> (Also 10:1-11:18; 13:1- 28:28; [cf. Luke 3:8])

This can also be presented as follows:

<b>LUKE-ACTS AND THE SALVATION OF ALL PEOPLE</b>	
<b>OPENING Salvation of Israel (Luke 1:76-77)</b>	<b>CLOSURE Salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 28:28)</b>
"You will go before the Lord...to give knowledge of salvation to his people".	"Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles".

To what does John owe his importance? The wording in Luke 1:17 clearly indicates John was a forerunner *for God*. The personal pronoun αὐτοῦ ("his") in the sentence "καὶ αὐτὸς προελεύσεται ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει Ἡλίου" (and he [John] will go before *him* in the spirit and power of Elijah") refers to the κύριον τὸν θεόν of verse 16 and indeed of all the verses in the section of Luke 1:6-25. In this, and in the case of many other quotations from the Old Testament, Luke remains faithful to the wording of the Septuagint. In the present narrative context the pronoun "him" clearly refers to God in as much as Elijah, in his prophetic role, was also a forerunner for God. In any case, the reference to Elijah is made in association with John and "the Lord God". We therefore can understand Conzelmann and Lindemann in their assertion that

It can be recognized clearly that [John] is not meant to be the forerunner of the one greater than he, but is himself destined to be the eschatological savior. John will be the bringer of joy (v 14), he will be called "great" (v 15), he is God's forerunner – hence not of the Messiah.<sup>658</sup>

Or, in the words of Scobie which, due to their significance for our purposes, are quoted at some length:

One feature of Luke I concerns the use of the word *kurios*, 'Lord', which clearly refers to God and translates the Old Testament *Yahweh*. Thus in Luke I.46:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord,  
rejoice, rejoice, my spirit, in God my Saviour.

'Lord' is paralleled by 'God, my Saviour'. This is in striking contrast to the rest of the Gospel where *kurios* is a favourite title of Jesus.

Then again, in Luke I there is a very high estimate of John. Up to a point the infancy narrative agrees with the Christian view of John as a prophet (I.76), the new Elijah (I.17), who will preach repentance (I.17, 77). But it goes further than this and further than any other part of the New Testament, for, since 'the Lord' means God himself, John is presented as the forerunner of God, and not of the Messiah.

'And he will bring back many Israelites to the Lord their God,  
and he will go before him (i.e. God) as forerunner, possessed by  
the spirit and power of Elijah'

(Luke I.16, 17). He will 'be the Lord's forerunner to prepare his way' (I.76). There is no room here for a Messiah, indeed John himself is virtually cast in that role; his birth is due to an act of divine intervention, he is filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (I.15), and with his birth God has already 'turned to his people,

<sup>658</sup> H. Conzelmann & A.L. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament*, 300.

saved them and set them free' and 'raised up a deliverer of victorious power' (I.68, 69). John's position in Luke I could hardly be more exalted.<sup>659</sup>

And to this accolade we must again add what we believe is the highest honour ever bestowed on John: "Among those born of women, none is greater than John". (Luke 7:28)

In any case, in any discussion on the supposed subordination of John to Jesus, or on whether John was a forerunner for Jesus, we would do well to not disregard the previously noted observation by some scholars that there lies behind the Gospel tradition an early anti-John polemic between the followers of Jesus and those of John.<sup>660</sup> According to the Fourth Gospel, for example, some people had apparently declared John to be the Messiah (John 3:22-36), hence the Pharisees' need for assurance concerning the real identity of John the Baptist:

the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask [John], "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness...." They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" (John 1:19-25)

The *Sitz im Leben* of this pericope is much disputed.<sup>661</sup> However, it would be worth considering how far and to what degree this pericope might have been meant to allay the fears of the early Christians over against the claims of a Johannine faction that

<sup>659</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 53.

<sup>660</sup> For example, J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*. This polemic was expressed in rather strong terms by some early Church Fathers like St. Ephrem in *Evangelii concordantis expositio facta a S. Ephraemo doctore syro*, in which the Syrian Doctor maintained that "Et discipuli Ioannis de Ioanne gloriantur et dicunt, eum esse Christo maiorem, qui ipse id testatus est dicens: Non est maior in natos ex muliere, quam Ioannes." And St. Ephrem, in concluding his polemic against the followers of John, sees their glorification of John over Jesus as the work of enemies: "Haec autem omnia praeparata sunt schismata, ut et fides Christi per haec impediretur, et baptisma." See the edition by G. Moesinger, Venice, (1876:287-288). See further the reference to the disciples of John the Baptist in the writings of the Pseudo-Clementines as discussed and translated by J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste*, 114-116. See also B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 58-60.

<sup>661</sup> The question of the *Sitz im Leben* of this and similar pericopae in John is not unrelated to the general discussion of both the context as well as the purpose of the Fourth Gospel. Many are the scholars who believe that, among other reasons, it was the intention of the author of the Fourth Gospel to settle for all time the dispute, between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus, over the superiority of Jesus over John. R. Bultmann, for example, is among those who hold this view. Indeed, he suggests that the description of John the Baptist as a forerunner is "something of the compromise" between the Johannine faction (who extolled John the Baptist above Jesus) and their Christian counterparts who sought to downplay John's role in order to give prominence to Jesus. See Bultmann's *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 164-166.

may have held that it was in fact John who was the Messiah, and not Jesus. What the probability of a polemic reveals is that there is need for a healthy scepticism in the way we evaluate John's relationship to Jesus as it is presented to us in the Gospels, particularly in the Fourth Gospel. This is where, for example, Chilton's advice that there is need "to free John from the apologetic and catechetical aims of the Synoptics" should be taken into consideration by any scholar of John the Baptist.<sup>662</sup>

It is certainly possible to see some traces of polemic in Luke-Acts, specifically in Acts 19:1-6, in which John's baptism is not considered by Paul to be sufficient to qualify as a believer. In spite of having received it, it is still necessary for the twelve disciples of John who have become "believers" to be baptized in the name of Jesus in order to receive the Holy Spirit. Strikingly, though, Apollos, who also knew only the baptism of John (Acts 18:24-25), is not asked to undergo the ritual again in the name of Jesus – though he does need to be vetted by Priscilla and Aquila with regard to his belief in Jesus (Acts 18:26-27). Apparently it is only when he passes the test that the way is open for him to proceed to Achaia from Ephesus. But in his case there was apparently no need to improve on John's baptism.

#### ***9.4 Some Key Texts on John the Baptist in Luke-Acts***

The author of Luke-Acts uses various devices to keep the reader's attention focused on John the Baptist, even in sections of the narrative that otherwise have Jesus or the disciples as the main protagonists. This is seen, for example, in the way in which our author uses bridging devices that, from a dramatic point of view, help the reader to constantly keep John the Baptist in mind even as the narrative develops. Such bridging devices are to be seen, for example, in Luke 1:39-56; 7:18-23; 9:7-9; 9:18-20; and Acts 1:22.

##### ***9.4.1 Luke 1:39-56<sup>663</sup>***

This passage, among the earliest in Luke-Acts to display a narrative link between John and Jesus, is unique in that the two protagonists encounter each other indirectly while in their mothers' wombs. The dynamics of the encounter are already quite

<sup>662</sup> B. Chilton, "John the Baptist: His Immersion and His Death" in S.E. Porter & A.R. Cross, *Dimensions of Baptism*, 25.

<sup>663</sup> See also C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 119-120.



significant. When Mary visits her kinswoman Elizabeth various things happen, among them the following:

- (a) Elizabeth's joy at meeting Mary transforms itself into the joy of her unborn child – "the babe in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). An alternative interpretation is given by I.H. Marshall<sup>664</sup> who cites E.E. Ellis as saying words to the effect that "an emotional experience of the mother can cause a movement of the foetus". A psycho-somatic interpretation seems to us to go beyond the bounds of the narrative, which must be seen in its dramatic context. L.T. Johnson correctly identifies the cultural context of the readers of Luke-Acts when he notes that miraculous or extraordinary occurrences "would have made perfect sense to any Hellenistic reader, who was accustomed to miraculous events accompanying the birth-accounts of extraordinary people".<sup>665</sup> The significance of the encounter is, however, fully captured by Marshall who has rightly noted: "Here is the beginning of John's witness to Jesus".<sup>666</sup>

The meeting of the two women is, to paraphrase Conzelmann, a symbolic encounter between two epochs,<sup>667</sup> the one represented by John, and the other by Jesus: the "Period of Israel" which, according to the author of Luke-Acts, is closing ("The law and the prophets were until John" – Luke 16:16a), and the "Period of Jesus" which has dawned ("since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached" – Luke 16:16b). The meeting of Elizabeth and Mary provides a hinge not only to the infancy narrative, but also to the unfolding story of the future relationship between John and Jesus, best seen in the well-known but polemic-laden phrase in John's Gospel: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

- (b) The encounter between Elizabeth and Mary serves, from a dramatic point of view, to link two narratives which, though parallel, are independent. The

<sup>664</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 80.

<sup>665</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 38.

<sup>666</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 77.

<sup>667</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer has noted, though in a different context, the significance of John's birth in relation to the unfolding salvation history. John is "transitional", a bridge between the waning "Period of Israel", and the dawning "Period of Jesus". See *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 321.

story of John which, in a sense, is personified in Elizabeth and has from the beginning been running its own independent course, comes into contact with the story of Jesus which, equally following its own independent course, is likewise, personified in Mary. Commentators have, however, true to the received tradition, been quick to draw our attention to the fact that this is not an encounter between equals. Fitzmyer, for example, sees a "step parallelism at work, i.e. a parallelism with one-upmanship. The Jesus-side always comes off better".<sup>668</sup> He then lists the various ways in which John is presented as subordinate to Jesus. L.T. Johnson makes the same point: "Stories concerning John are matched with those about Jesus, in each case showing Jesus' superiority".<sup>669</sup>

- (c) The "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55) and later the "Benedictus" (Luke 1:68-79) appear in reality to be an interpretation of the significance of both the prophecies about John (Luke 1:5-25), and about Jesus (Luke 1:26-38) as well as of the birth narratives (Luke 1:57-66 for John, and 2:1-20 for Jesus). Scholars have noted that the literary style between the "Magnificat" and the "Benedictus" is similar.<sup>670</sup>

What emerges from this brief analysis is what appears to be a conscious attempt by the author of Luke-Acts to more than just present a parallel account of the lives of John and Jesus. Neither is it merely an effort at establishing a relationship between two pivotal characters in the narrative. The author of Luke-Acts establishes a unity of purpose and a similarity of message rarely encountered between any two persons in the New Testament. The ministries of John and Jesus have, from the beginning, one end in view: the salvation of all humanity through repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>668</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 315.

<sup>669</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 34.

<sup>670</sup> So, for example, Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 86 and Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 34.

#### 9.4.2 Luke 7:18-23

This is without doubt one of the most pivotal texts in Luke-Acts. A major strand emerges in a narrative and theological climax. The messianic hope that links John and Jesus is explicitly brought to the fore. Luke 7:18-20 reads as follows:

The disciples of John told him of all these things. And John, calling to him two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"

Luke 7:18 reads: "The disciples of John told him all these things". "All these things" refers in the immediate narrative context to Jesus' teaching and actions, namely Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10), and the raising to life of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17). It is John's hearing of "these things" that triggers the question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Between John's incarceration in Luke 3:20 and his asking of the question in Luke 7:19 Jesus is well into his ministry, and a lot has happened: Jesus has preached in Nazareth and won the adulation of all when he proclaimed the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1 and 58:6; this popular approval very quickly turns into disapproval that threatens the very life of Jesus (Luke 4:16-30); Jesus has cast out unclean spirits (Luke 4:31-37); he has healed many people (Luke 4:38-41; 5:12-16, 17-26; 6:6-11; 7:1-10); he has established his inner core of followers (Luke 6:12-16); and he has raised a dead man to life (Luke 7:11-17). An impressive *curriculum vitae* by any standards. And throughout this span of Jesus' life while John is in prison we are told that "all spoke well of him" (Luke 4:22); that "reports of him went out into every place in the surrounding region" (Luke 4:37); that "the report went abroad concerning him" (Luke 5:15); and that reports "concerning him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country" (Luke 7:17). Jesus became truly a famous man while John languished in prison, but even there John too heard of him and of all the things Jesus was saying and doing. On one level it is not surprising that, given this record of Jesus' deeds, John too, like many of his time, also began to see in Jesus one through whom and in whom the messianic prophecies of old were being fulfilled. On the other hand, however, John is not sure: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" There appears to be a certain level at which Jesus apparently does not

quite measure up to John's expectation of the messiah, and yet if we go back to John's expectations of the coming one as indicated in Luke 3:16-17 it is actually difficult to see in what way Jesus might not have lived up to those expectations.

In Luke 3:16-17 John says of the coming one: "he who is mightier than I is coming...he will baptize you with the Holy spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." That Jesus undertook his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit is indicated very early on in Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:18). The involvement of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life is indicated even before Jesus is born: the Holy Spirit was to come upon Mary his mother, who would then conceive and bear Jesus (Luke 1:35); and it was when Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" that he was led to the desert, there to be prepared for his ministry. In other words, then, John's association of the coming one with the Holy Spirit is amply borne out in Jesus' life up to the point of John's question in Luke 7:19 and beyond (Acts 1:8). Though Luke-Acts does not record Jesus as baptizing anyone, and though the point cannot be assumed, it could possibly be conjectured that, had Jesus in fact baptized, this action would presumably have been carried out in the power of the same Holy Spirit in and with which Jesus' other actions are reported as having been undertaken (e.g. Luke 4:1, 14, 18).

John's proclamation of the coming one was that he would also baptize by fire. We will see below the link between baptism (lustration) and fire (purification). The same speculation for the link between Jesus and baptism holds for a speculative link between Jesus, baptism and fire.

John's expectation was that the coming one would be a judge, and would bring about judgment. Jesus was clearly not the eschatological judge, but God was, and throughout Luke-Acts this is underlined. Judgment will be brought about by God, and Jesus' task was to prepare the people for the day of God's judgment. Here is one area in which Jesus did not fulfill John's expectations of the coming one. Therefore, while Jesus appeared to fulfill a significant portion of the portfolio of the coming one,

there was one critical area in which he departed from the characteristics associated with the coming one.<sup>671</sup>

#### 9.4.3 *The Fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1*

In responding to John's question in Luke 7:19 ("Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?") Jesus lists the actions of God's messenger listed in Isaiah 61:1-3. Indeed, Jesus has, so to speak, ticked off items on Isaiah's list in Luke 4:16-21. In Luke 7:22 Jesus says John's messengers are to go back to him and tell him how "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus proclaims in the synagogue of Nazareth that the words of the prophet Isaiah have been fulfilled in him who has been anointed to preach good news to the poor and to "proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

The text of Isaiah 61:1-3 reads as follows:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

We noted earlier that among the characteristics and functions of the awaited messiah was the liberation of captives, the proclamation of good news (cf. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation..." – Isaiah 52:7). On hearing Jesus' response, would John have been able to see and understand the connection of what Jesus was saying with Isaiah's messianic prophecy? It is true that John himself has already been associated with another text of Isaiah 40:3-5 in Luke 3:4-6, but this is a link made by the author of Luke-Acts. John may have understood himself as the preparer of the way envisaged in Isaiah 40, and we can, on account of this association and the general eschatological perspective of the period, assume that he was steeped

<sup>671</sup> For various possibilities regarding the identity of the coming one, see J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel I-X*, 666. Fitzmyer does not believe that ὁ ἐρχόμενος refers to Jesus in this context, but rather to "Elias redivivus".



in the Isaianic and indeed prophetic tradition. Jesus' answer would therefore have struck a familiar cord in terms of the ardent messianic expectation of the time.

P. B. Decock has noted in a detailed study of the significance of Isaiah 61:1 in Luke 7:1-8:3 that there is "an astonishing note of fulfilment" in Luke 7:1-8:3 when it is read in the light of Isaiah 61:1.<sup>672</sup> Furthermore, Decock notes that Luke 7:22-23 is to be understood against the apocalyptic background of Isaiah 61:1.

The link between John and Jesus by the use of Isaiah 61:1 is particularly significant in the literary unit that is Luke 7:1-8:3 as P.B. Decock has shown in a detailed study of the relationship between the two texts.<sup>673</sup> In response to John's question "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus refers to the Jewish hope expressed in Isaiah 61:1, and so significant is this hope in the activity of Jesus that the text of Isaiah 61:1 is used at both the beginning and end of Luke 7:22-23 and frames Jesus' response to John.

Decock has noted various key elements in the way in which Isaiah 61:1 is used in Luke 7:1-8:3. Among these are the following:

- (a) Isaiah 61:1 appears both at the beginning and end of Jesus' response to John.<sup>674</sup>
- (b) There is, in Luke 7:1-8:3, "an astonishing note of fulfilment"<sup>675</sup> of the messianic hope in general and of Isaiah 61:1 in particular.
- (c) The identification of Jesus as the coming one. According to Decock, "By means of John's question, 'Are you the coming one...?' Jesus, the messenger of the good news, is identified as the one whom John announced, as the Christ (in contrast to John) (Lk 3:15-18)."<sup>676</sup> It should be noted, however, that in the context of Luke 7:18-23 this identification is made by the author of Luke-Acts and not by John. The text as such does not lead to the conclusion that John saw in Jesus the long awaited Christ.

<sup>672</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 57.

<sup>673</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 55-74.

<sup>674</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 56.

<sup>675</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 57.

<sup>676</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 61-62.

(d) The "Elijah imagery in Lk 7:1-8:3".<sup>677</sup> In the pericope under consideration healing is explicitly mentioned: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up" (Luke 7:22). Decock sees this reference to healing, and indeed in the larger literary unit of Luke 7:1-8:3, as calling to mind the ministry of Elijah and Elisha: "Lk 7:22 mentions the healing of lepers and the raising of the dead. It may be important to bear in mind that both Elijah and Elisha raised people from the dead (1 Ki 17-8:24; 2 Ki 4:18-37), while Elisha healed the leper Naaman (2 Ki 5:1-19)."

(e) The fulfillment of prophecy. Of the Lucan texts that link John and Jesus together, this is possibly the clearest that expresses (even though this is from the perspective of Jesus) that the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 has been fulfilled.<sup>678</sup> If Luke 7:1-8:3 is read together with Luke 4:16-21 the reader of the Third Gospel from John's perspective is left in no doubt that Isaiah 61:1 is being fulfilled, and John's question becomes the means by which this 'revelation' is made.

Luke 7:18-23 is thus significant in that it establishes a clear link between John and Jesus and the messianic tradition of the prophets. The further strand that links both John and Jesus with the Elijah and Elisha tradition as noted by P.B. Decock further extends the significance of Luke 7:18-23 throughout the Gospel. Decock has rightly noted that "Luke 7:1-8:3 is a key section in the first part of Luke's Gospel (Lk 3:1-9:50)...Furthermore, two statements in Lk 7:22, 'the blind see' and 'the deaf hear' echo throughout the Gospel."<sup>679</sup>

In conclusion, in Luke 7:18-23 John and Jesus are linked by the messianic hope that they both shared (in common with the people of their time). For John, the hope is yet to be conclusively fulfilled in a definitive manner (hence his question). For Jesus, however, the hope expressed in Isaiah 61:1 is already being fulfilled in and through him. Jesus already lives and acts in the conviction that "the kingdom of heaven is close at hand [in fact it is] among you" - Luke 17:21). The author of Luke-Acts does

<sup>677</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 63.

<sup>678</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 70.

<sup>679</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 69.

not present John as being equally convinced on this point. Indeed it is likely that the reader of Luke-Acts may be left with the suspicion that John may perhaps even have died in the expectation that the messianic hope was *yet* to be fulfilled.

#### **9.4.4 Luke 9:18-20**

A third example of a literary device that forms a bridge between the separate narratives about John and about Jesus connects them in an even clearer way, perhaps, than the other examples so far given. John and Jesus are explicitly associated with one another, so much so that their identities have become merged in the eyes of the people to the extent that they actually are no longer able to tell the one from the other: "Now it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, 'Who do the people say that I am?' And they answered, 'John the Baptist...'"

What emerges from the analysis above is that there was a substantial sector of the community that saw in John the Baptist not just the prophet expected to precede the messiah, but in fact the messiah himself. This is seen particularly in the way that the people expected some messianic functions to be fulfilled by John, and when Jesus is instead seen to be fulfilling those functions (for example those listed in the *Messianic Apocalypse* of Qumran and in Luke 4:16-22 and Luke 7:22) he is immediately taken by the people to be John the Baptist. Indeed, Herod himself makes the same assumption when, hearing about all that Jesus was doing, Herod's first thought is that John the Baptist, whom he had killed, had been raised from the dead. There did not seem to be an expectation that someone else apart from John might do the same things.

Such a strange mix-up of identities in the conception of the people can only be explained by the fact that what the two preached was so similar that their hearers could make little or no distinction between the speakers. For the audiences of both John and Jesus, what apparently struck them most was the message that was proclaimed, rather than the proclaimers themselves.

#### 9.4.5 Acts 1:22

The link between John and Jesus in this pericope is instructive on two counts: firstly it establishes the qualification for apostleship, i.e. it pegs the range of experience required of an apostle, and, secondly, it defines the *content* of the witnessing mandate of the disciples throughout Acts. In Acts 1:15-26 Luke returns to some unfinished business from the Third Gospel, namely the question of the replacement of Judas “who was guide to those who arrested Jesus” (Luke 1:16), and who, having bought a field with the blood money received for betraying Jesus, and “falling headlong...burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18-20). The condition for the election of Judas’ successor, as well as the qualification necessary for eligibility for this post are clearly stated by Peter:

one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, *beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us*<sup>680</sup> – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

However, be that as it may, the fact remains that, during his ministry, Jesus established a uniquely close relationship with his apostles. They became a band of brothers. It was a period of the closest bonding between Jesus and the Twelve, even though when the going got tough during the passion narrative their courage humanly failed them. Indeed, Peter the presumptuous one, generally wont to speaking without thinking, was the first to fail the test of loyalty in spite of earlier strenuous avowals to fidelity (Luke 22:31-34; 54-62). According to Mark’s account, some of the younger blood among the apostles were so overcome with fright that they completely abandoned Jesus and took to their heels, with one of the men, in his haste to escape, not even caring to linger long enough to cover his nakedness (Mark 14:51-52).

Some commentators have largely overlooked the significance of the span of time spent by one as a member of the select group of the Twelve, choosing instead to dwell either on the necessity for the reconstitution of the apostolic number, or on the significance of Judas’ death and his replacement by Matthias.<sup>681</sup> Others, however,

<sup>680</sup> Our italics.

<sup>681</sup> So, for example, J.A. Fitzmyer (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 218-221), F. Mussner (*Apostelgeschichte*, Würzburg, Echter Verlag, 1988, 19-20), and, to some extent, L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 38-41. Johnson, however, does not neglect the significance of the reference to John the Baptist, about which see below. On the other hand, J.R.W. Stott (*The Message of Acts*, 54-56) entirely fails to grasp

have not altogether missed the import of this segment of the narrative. F.F. Bruce, for example, stresses on grammatical grounds that the condition for qualification refers "Not merely from the period after John's imprisonment (Mk. 1:14-20) but from the time of his ministry".<sup>682</sup> This reference to the period from John's baptism to the ascension also demarcates the period of close personal contact between Jesus and the Twelve,<sup>683</sup> a period which we may take to be one of intense personal and spiritual formation and preparation of the apostles for the times and tasks ahead.

The reference in Peter's speech to ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βαπτίσματος Ἰωάννου ἕως ... ("beginning from...John until..."), when read in conjunction with Acts 10:36-41:

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ-- he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead,

defines the extent and the range of experience required of an apostle, a period which, in turn, corresponds with the scope of the message of the apostles. Their main task is to bear witness to what has happened in the interim between the baptism of John and the ascension of Jesus. These are the two critical points of reference for the proclamation of the good news throughout Luke-Acts. The same timeframe is reflected in part of Paul's programmatic speech in Acts 13:24-31:

before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.' "My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the

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the significance of John the Baptist in this and related texts. E. Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 161) makes a barely passable note on the reference to John in this text.

<sup>682</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 111. L.T. Johnson, similarly, notes the significance of Luke's use ("in several places") of John "to demarcate the beginning of Jesus' ministry"

<sup>683</sup> So also J. Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 127.



tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people.

This speech is instructive because it is given at the start of the first of his three extensive missionary journeys – a speech which outlines both the content of, as well as the *modus operandi* employed throughout those great missionary journeys.

The fact that John the Baptist is a reference point for the apostolic message, and indeed for the messages of all witnesses to the resurrection, places him in a key position in relation to the mission mandate of Acts 1:8 – “you shall be my witnesses...to the end of the earth”. The *content* of the witnessing has John the Baptist as its starting point. In other words, John and his baptism are used to demarcate the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, a device that the author of Luke-Acts uses frequently, for example at Luke 3:23; 16:16; Acts 1:5; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24-25; 18:25; 19:3-4.

John marks both the beginning of the Christian message as well as the mission witness to that message to the Gentiles. He marks the beginning of the Christian message in as much as the task has been entrusted to him to “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17). John also marks the beginning of the witnessing mission to the Gentiles in the sense that by concluding the age of the prophets he in fact introduces the period of the proclamation of the Gospel to all humanity – “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” – Luke 16:16. This is the age of the breakthrough to the Gentiles. Among other reasons, Peter justifies himself for baptizing Cornelius and his household (and the subsequent reception of the Holy Spirit by these newly converted Gentile believers) by reminding his detractors that Jesus himself had, in fact, referred to the age of John’s baptism in relation to the new baptism to be received by all:

the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit’. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave us...who was I that I could withstand God? (Acts 11:15-17)

So much for the links between John and Jesus. Granted there is unity in their overall mission, the agents however are different. At the point at which all the links noted

above are established, there is in fact a physical and even geographic separation between John and Jesus. For example, while Jesus has been active in Capernaum (or Nain), John is a prisoner at Machaerus. In fact, by the time we get to the point of the second link between them above, it has been a while since the reader came across John in the narrative (Luke 7:18-23), and the abruptness of the reference to him at Luke 9:7-9 highlights the fact the Jesus and John are not together. This seems to indicate that if we were to remove Luke 9:7-9 from the general story as it is narrated from the perspective of Jesus, John is actually altogether quite superfluous to this narrative as a whole. Likewise, if we go back to where we last were with John at Luke 7:18-23, and connect that with where we now meet him again at Luke 9:7-9, then Jesus likewise becomes redundant in the story as it is now narrated from the perspective of John. Luke 7:18-23 flows very neatly into Luke 9:7-9. Everything else in between can be detached without loss if the narrative is viewed from John's perspective.

What happens in Acts is particularly significant. Testimony about John is given by two pivotal figures in the Acts narrative: Peter (on three occasions: Acts 1:22; 10:37; 11:16) and Paul (Acts 13:24-25). It will be borne in mind that it was in fact Peter who baptized the first Gentile, Cornelius, and his household (Acts 10:1-48). It will also be borne in mind that Jesus had already said in Luke 16:16 that John represented the *caesura* between the old order and the new: "the Law and the prophets were until John". And this is in fact what Peter gives concrete witness to when he baptizes Cornelius and his household. This episode represents the transition from particularism to universalism in the history of salvation: no longer is the gospel for Jews alone ("do not begin to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father..'" – Luke 3:8a), but for all those who believe ("for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" – Luke 3:8b). In other words, God is able to (and indeed *is* going to) make anyone into a member of the chosen race as long as they repent and display the right disposition and attitude in respect of God's laws. As Peter says: "I perceived that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Or, in the words of Paul: "[the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16); "For there is no

distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him." (Romans 10:12).<sup>684</sup>

The role of John in demarcating the period out of which the events contained in the Christian message is acknowledged by what F.F. Bruce says are the pivotal figures of Acts, namely Peter and Paul. A part of Peter's *apologia* for baptizing the first recorded Gentile Christian in the New Testament is that he has finally perceived that God has no favourites: "everyone who does right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35), and this insight has come to him after knowing and understanding the word God "sent to Israel...the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached". Peter's argument therefore is: that word of God (namely, "preaching good news of peace", Acts 10:36); that word initially preached by John, a word which Jesus took up and based his own ministry upon (Acts 10:38), is the same word, in fact, which has given Peter the great insight that God does not show partiality. All are acceptable regardless of national provenance. And so, with the power of words whose force goes back to the preaching of John (Acts 10:37), Peter had taken the step that henceforth would remove all barriers to salvation.

Peter understood his baptism of Cornelius as logical. On the basis of John's proclamation and Jesus' ministry, it was a logical progression, and indeed a self-evident process, that Gentiles could no longer be excluded from the fold of the people of God and that they should therefore also be baptized. Though Peter initiated the baptism of Gentiles, it was Paul who became the missionary *par excellence* to them. According to Paul, all this becomes possible in some measure due to the proclamation of John the Baptist.

The same line is picked up in Paul's testimony about John. The new reality that dawned after the age that John brought to a close is completed by the transition that Paul himself represents, namely the passage from Judaism (from the Law and the prophets) to the Gentiles (Acts 1:8). The events in the life and ministry of John represent a watershed that is 'exploited' by Paul. In a sense, it may be said that in

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<sup>684</sup> See also Galatians 3:23-29.

some way John the Baptist ultimately paved the way for Paul's ministry. And if this is the case, would the missionary activity of the early Christian community as well as that of subsequent generations of Christians not actually be said to trace its footsteps at best in some measure back to John the Baptist for its legitimation? John's was a voice preparing the way for universal evangelization.

Peter's bold action, inspired, among other things, by his own interpretation of John, leads him to one of the single most important decisions by a leading person of the group of the Twelve: he throws the doors of salvation open to the Gentiles and, for him, the preaching of John is expressed more concretely in the ministry of Jesus as being at the heart of this new mission. Peter's mission leads not only to the baptism of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:45), but to their receiving the Holy Spirit, a source of greater wonder for some of those of the circumcised party (Acts 10:45-46). Reminiscent of the earlier Pentecost narrative, this pericope suggests that Cornelius and his household were now to be counted fully among those that earlier proclamation had been directed to, the same message that Jesus embellished and dramatized in so many different ways, but which, nonetheless, had been initiated by John the Baptist.

## **10. NONE GREATER THAN JOHN THE BAPTIST**

### ***10.1 Introduction***

The tradition of early Christianity as presented in the Gospels is constant in its testimony to the relationship of the ministry of John the Baptist to the beginning of that of Jesus. This is one of the most striking areas of consensus in the Gospel tradition. All the Gospels present John the Baptist as a reform-preacher in the wilderness, where he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In all the Gospels John the Baptist is identified with "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" of Isaiah 40:3 (Mark 1:3, Matthew 3:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23). Each Gospel tradition has John the Baptist proclaiming that his baptism by water is but a foreshadowing of another baptism by the Holy Spirit (and also by fire, in "Q") – a baptism to be administered by

one who is coming after him, one mightier than he. We have already noted the discussion around the possible identification of "the one".<sup>685</sup>

For a long time in the past the subject of characterization in New Testament writings was not seriously taken into account by scholars, a fact that led J.A. Darr to raise the following questions and to lament that

biblical critics have largely neglected the subject of Lukan characterization. How is distance (the level of identification between reader and character) controlled? What devices give a personage depth and individuality? Are figures illustrative (typed/symbolic) or more realistic? What roles do characters play and how are such roles recognized by the reader? What contemporary literary stereotypes and social conventions are evoked? How do characters contribute to the discourse or rhetoric of the work? These and other such literary questions have seldom been formulated or posed, much less answered, by interpreters of Luke-Acts.<sup>686</sup>

Recently, however, a number of scholars have noted the significance that the author of Luke-Acts attaches to characterization.<sup>687</sup> Thus, for example, characters like Paul and Peter are seen to play a significant role in transmitting the message of Acts. Indeed, a number of modern scholars suggest that questions regarding the purposes of Luke-Acts are not to be considered independently of the roles that the author has assigned to his key characters, roles that are of more than just literary or narrative significance for, as we shall see in the case of John the Baptist, the actions and sayings of some of Luke's key characters are indeed the vehicle through which the theological purposes of Luke-Acts are transmitted to, and understood by, the reader. In other words, most modern scholars acknowledge that it is possible to determine the main trajectories of the theology of Luke-Acts through a close analysis of the roles and functions of, for example, such major figures as John the Baptist,<sup>688</sup> Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others.

All of Luke's major characters play a significant role: they are all means by which God's unfolding plan for the salvation of all humanity is fulfilled. The characters may obviously not necessarily play the same roles, or roles of equal significance, and

<sup>685</sup> See also the discussion by C. Scobie on the possible identity of "the one" in his *John the Baptist*, 73-79, 125-130.

<sup>686</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 11.

<sup>687</sup> See, for example, the works collected in D. Rhoads & K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels*, and C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*.

<sup>688</sup> See also C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 2-3.



John's active life is briefly (though richly) presented in Luke-Acts. There is hardly enough material to put together a composite biography in the technical sense, i.e. a precise chronological and historical sequence of events in John's life from his birth, to his ministry, and eventually to his death. Apart from the very brief (and problematic<sup>691</sup>) information that John "was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel" (Luke 1:80), there is a yawning gap between the account of his birth in Luke 1:5-79 and the account of his ministry in Luke 3:1-20. After that there is a brief account of John sending two of his disciples to Jesus to enquire whether he is the promised one, or they should wait for another (Luke 7:18-23). It is only in passing that we are informed of John's death, and even then there is such a dearth of detail that the reader must turn to Matthew (14:1-12) or to Josephus (*Ant.* xviii) for a fuller account and interpretation of the circumstances leading to John's death.

### 10.2 *The Birth Narrative*

The story of John's birth is narrated parallel to the birth and infancy of Jesus, though it makes up a distinct unit of its own in Luke 1:5-2:52. From this section we learn, for example, that John

will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:15-17)

We also know, through John's father, Zechariah, that John

will be called the prophet of the Most High; for [he] will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

At the conclusion of the infancy narrative we are told that John "grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel"

<sup>691</sup> See for example, W.H. Brownlee, "A Comparison of the Covenanters of the Dead Sea Scrolls with Pre-Christian Jewish Sects", *Biblical Archaeologist* 13 (1950), 50-72; C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*; A.S. Geyser, "The Youth of John the Baptist", *NovT* 1 (1957), 70-75.

(Luke 1:80). The assertion by some scholars (for example Scobie and Brownlee)<sup>692</sup> that Luke 1:80 is to be interpreted as referring to the possibility that John was adopted as a boy by one of the baptist movements must remain, in the current state of research, as merely that: a possibility.<sup>693</sup> Brownlee bases himself on Josephus' assertion that though the Essenes disdain marriage, they nonetheless

adopt other men's children, while yet pliable and docile, and regard them as their own kin and mould them in accordance with their own principles.<sup>694</sup>

A.S. Geyser was quite taken with Brownlee's suggestion and became convinced that there were distinct similarities between the beliefs and practices of John the Baptist and those of the sect of the Dead Sea scrolls:

outward appearance, words and acts betray the fact that [John] has been formed by one or other of the Essene sects inhabiting that very vast region between Khirbet-Qumran and Massada.<sup>695</sup>

While Scobie finds certain elements of Geyser's argument rather "far fetched", he does, however, confess that "the general idea of adoption by some baptist sect is attractive".<sup>696</sup> Scobie himself opines that the reason Luke 1:80 furnishes us with no further details about John's upbringing or

break with home life could be explained by the fact that John's parents died, or by the fact that they entrusted him to the care of some monastic community.<sup>697</sup>

### 10.3 *John's Ministry*

In Luke-Acts, the ministry of John the Baptist is narrated in simple enough terms. After a lengthy introduction in the birth narrative, in which the reader has already been informed of the special characteristics and personality of John, it is with a more or less clear idea of what to expect that the reader goes into the ministerial period of John's life and beyond. The prophetic setting of the birth narrative, as well as the many other motifs from prophecy so liberally applied to John in the first part of Luke-

<sup>692</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 58, and W.H. Brownlee, "A Comparison of the Covenanters of the Dead Sea Scrolls with Pre-Christian Jewish Sects", *Biblical Archaeologist* 13 (1950), 50-72.

<sup>693</sup> See also A.S. Geyser, "The Youth of John the Baptist", *NovT* 1 (1956), 70-75.

<sup>694</sup> *War* ii.8.

<sup>695</sup> A.S. Geyser, "The Youth of John the Baptist", *NovT* 1 (1956), 70-75.

<sup>696</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 59.

<sup>697</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 59.

Acts have placed the reader squarely in a 'prophetic frame of mind', and has attuned the reader to a particular prophetic (or generally Old Testament) wavelength from which the rest of the narrative is set to unfold. In broad terms, this is how John's ministry is presented in Luke-Acts:

	TEXT	DESCRIPTION OF MINISTRY
<b>L</b>	1:16	The Angel Gabriel describes the as yet unborn John's future ministry: "He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."
	1:75-78	Zechariah describes his newly-born son John's future ministry: "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God."
	3:2b-6	Beginning of John's public ministry: "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness, and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."
	3:4	An Old Testament text (Is. 40:3-5) is applied to John: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"
<b>U</b>	3:7-9	John says to the multitudes that come to be baptized by him: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance....every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".
	3:10-14	John's social and ethical code: "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none, and he who has food let him do likewise...Collect no more than is appointed you...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation."
	3:16	John's baptism: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of his sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."
	3:18	With many other exhortations, [John] preached good news to the people.
<b>K</b>	3:19	John's moral code: "Herod the tetrarch had been reprov'd by [John] for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that he had done".
	5:33	John's spiritual life: "The disciples of John fast often, and offer prayers".
	7:26	Jesus describes John's ministry: "What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."
	7:30	Not all accept John's ministry. Rejection of John's baptism and the consequences thereof: "But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by John".
<b>E</b>	11:1	John's life of prayer: "One [of Jesus' disciples] said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'".
	20:6	The chief priests, scribes and elders express the public's opinion about John's ministry: "The people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet".
	1:5	Jesus' testimony to John's ministry: "John baptized with water..."
	10:37	Peter testifies about John's ministry: "The word which was proclaimed...after the baptism of John".
<b>C</b>	11:16	Peter testifies about John's ministry: "John baptized with water..."
	13:24-25	Paul testifies about John's ministry: "before [Jesus'] coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel".
<b>T</b>	18:25	Apollos "knew only the baptism of John".
<b>S</b>	19:1-7	Paul encounters 12 believers who knew only the baptism of John: "Into what then were you baptized?"...they answered, "Into John's baptism".

Luke makes it clear to his readers that the role of John the Baptist was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5. For this reason, John's ministry is prefaced by a quotation from that Old Testament passage. John goes about his ministry "as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet" (Luke 3:4).

In its narrative context, the text of Isaiah 40:3-5 is taken from the first chapter of what is also known as the 'Book of Consolation', or deutero-Isaiah. This section of the book of Isaiah is addressed to a people in exile, and speaks to them of their coming redemption or a second exodus experience. The application of this pericope to John the Baptist is striking in a number of ways:

- (a) A prominent motif in deutero-Isaiah is that of the new exodus, a new dispensation which symbolizes a new relationship forged between God and Israel based on new criteria. While in its previous dispensation this relationship was based on an 'external' law, namely:

Once we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt by his mighty hand. Before our eyes, Yahweh worked great and terrible signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and his entire household. And he brought us out of there, to lead us into the country which he had sworn to our ancestors that he would give us. And Yahweh has commanded us to observe all these laws and to fear Yahweh our God, so as to be happy for ever and to survive as we do to this day. For us, right living will mean this: to keep and observe all these commandments in obedience to Yahweh our God, as he has commanded us. (Deuteronomy 6:21-25),

the new relationship is to be founded on Yahweh's law inscribed in the heart of every Jewish person in a way that would make it unnecessary for one Israelite to instruct another in the fear of Yahweh:

Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and so will live. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

I shall give them a single heart and I shall put a new spirit in them; I shall remove the heart of stone from their bodies and given them a heart of flesh, so that they can keep my laws and respect my judgments and put them into practice. Then they will be my people and I shall be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19-21).

In a similar way, John proclaims a new dispensation, a starting afresh in the relationship between God and humanity. The relationship is no longer based on Abrahamic descent, but on repentance.

(b) The reference in Isaiah 40:5 to "all flesh" is repeated in various forms in Luke-Acts. In relation to John the Baptist this is seen not so much in a verbatim recollection of the phrase, but rather in a conceptual application. John is associated with the salvation of all, for universalism is a theme that is as significant in Luke (πάντων οὖν...μὴ ποιοῦν – 3:9) as it is to Isaiah (πάντα σὰρξ – 40:5). The impersonal and non-specific ποιοῦν of Luke 3:9 (and the implicit sense in the ἐκ τῶν λίθων of the succeeding verse) denotes humanity in general, that is to say a universal conception of the human person.

(c) A word that is used in Isaiah 40:3 and that has taken on greater significance in Luke-Acts is ὁδός (way). John the Baptist is seen as one who prepares "the way of the Lord" (Luke 3:4), while later on in Acts the Christian movement is referred to as "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23). The "voice" of Isaiah 40:3 calls for the preparation of a way leading to liberation, a second exodus, while John the Baptist also prepares the way to salvation at the impending judgment of God, and the preparation of this "way" (always understood in a theological sense rather than in a physical or geographic one) eventually leads to the establishment of the "the Way" that is the community of salvation, namely the Christian community.

Though the text of Isaiah 40:3 is used in relation to John the Baptist, some scholars note a broader significance in the way that the word ὁδός is understood in Luke-Acts. Thus P.B. Decock, for example, notes that

The original function of Is 40:3 in the synoptic tradition was to explain the meaning of John's ministry. Luke, while not abandoning its earlier use, has focused his attention on the Christological possibilities of this text...The importance of 'the Way' in Luke-Acts demands that...we understand the *Way of the Lord* as the concrete life of Jesus...While Luke *continued* the traditional application of this text to John, he



*developed* the Christological interpretation of the Way of the Lord, and he *extended* its use to his paraenesis and his ecclesiology.<sup>698</sup>

(d) The Isaiah text, both in its original setting as well as in its application to John the Baptist in Luke 3:3-6, is used in a context of judgment. In its original setting, the text interprets the exile as God's righteous indignation and judgment on an unrepentant nation, while at the same time expressing confidence in a coming restoration. In its application to John, both poles of the text (judgment and restoration/salvation) are evident: the coming judgment can be an occasion for salvation if the people repent, are baptized, and bear fruits worthy of repentance.

(e) The exhortation – be it to repentance (Luke-Acts), or to the preparation of the way of the Lord in the wilderness (Isaiah) – always expressed in the imperative – is addressed to a collectivity of people, both in Isaiah 40:3-5 (ἐτοιμασατε, ποιείτε) and in Luke 3:7-14 (ποιήσατε, πράσσετε, μὴ ἄρξησθε, μεταδώτω, ποιείτω, μηδὲν...συκοφαντήσητε, μηδὲνα διασείσητε, μηδὲ καὶ ἀρκείσθε). John's exhortation is more forceful, more urgent, and Luke shows this by his repeated use of the imperative. A parallel presentation of the two texts looks thus:

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<sup>698</sup> P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 75. This, of course, is a uniquely *Christian* interpretation of Isaiah 40:3 in Luke-Acts. It is unlikely that John the Baptist would have understood his role in these terms of reference.

THE EXHORTATIONS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND ISAIAH	
<i>Luke 3:9-14</i>	<i>Isaiah 40:3-5</i>
<p>“Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”<sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”<sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”<sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”<sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”</p>	<p>A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”</p>

(f) In both Isaiah 40:3-5 and Luke 3:7-14 it is made clear that the salvation to come is not going to be an act of God alone; those to be saved must contribute to their own salvation. In a sense, the people must make a decision for or against salvation. The people's response to the prophets (i.e. to deutero-Isaiah and to John the Baptist) is determinative: repentance and bearing fruit, which are both the basis as well as the result of baptism, are a *sine qua non* for personal as well as national redemption.

(g) In Luke's version of the use of Isaiah 40:3-5, this Old Testament text is quoted not by John himself (as in the Fourth Gospel, 1:23), so that it comes across as Luke's own commentary and particular understanding of the role of John the Baptist that Luke would like to transmit to his readers. In this way, Luke establishes a direct link between John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets. According to Luke, the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5 is fulfilled in the ministry of John.

h) Isaiah 40:3-5 speaks of the voice in the wilderness as preparing the way for God, and as Luke applies this text to John the Baptist he keeps the Septuagint wording and meaning, and by so doing indicates either the existence of a tradition, or his own belief that John the Baptist was the prophet that would precede God's judgment.<sup>699</sup> This seems to indicate an earlier tradition (or perhaps a tradition contemporaneous with Luke and his audience) regarding John's role, a tradition that did not necessarily link John the Baptist with Jesus. In other words, John was preparing the way (as was the wilderness voice in deutero-Isaiah) for the coming judgment or intervention of God. The tradition that associates John's preparatory function with Jesus appears in this light to be a later Christian construct that Luke appears to have not been completely at ease with, and which he was not always successful in sustaining. J.E. Taylor suggests that the application of the Isaiah text to John as it is in the (later) Gospel tradition was made by Christians for "their own particular reasons". This is evident, not least, in the way that "Christian exegesis of Isa. 40:3 identified the 'LORD' whose path was being prepared with Jesus, though the verse in fact refers to the Lord God, YHWH, not to the Messiah".<sup>700</sup>

According to Luke 3:3, the ministry of John was not localized in one area only. It is reported that John "went into all the region about the Jordan" – which implies some extensive moving around. In this connection, the position of H. Stegemann fails to convince. While we are in agreement with his insistence that John's activity took place east of the Jordan,<sup>701</sup> it does appear to us that Stegemann goes beyond the text when he tries to pinpoint a precisely fixed location from which John ministered.<sup>702</sup> John was an itinerant preacher and baptizer, not like a seer who dispensed wisdom from one locality or shrine.

Though briefly narrated, the kernel of John's message, and the means by which that message was delivered, are graphically expressed. As a concrete illustration of his message, John practised a "baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3; Acts 10:37; 19:4). The significance of this ritual is discussed in greater detail below. We can,

<sup>699</sup> See J.E. Taylor's exegesis of this text in *The Immerser*, 25-28.

<sup>700</sup> J.E. Talor, *The Immerser*, 29.

<sup>701</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 213-214, 220, 223 – contra E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. I, 341, n.21.

<sup>702</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 213.

however, note here that for the author of Luke-Acts, refusal of John's baptism is synonymous with rejection of salvation ("but the Pharisees and the lawyers τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἡθέτησαν εἰς ἑαυτοὺς μὴ βαπτισθέντες ὑπ' [Ἰωαννοῦ] – "rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by John" – Luke 7:30).

The main outlines of John's message are described by the author of Luke-Acts in select passages as follows:

in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...[John] said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father': for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:2-14)

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:15-17)

The disciples of John told him of all [that Jesus was doing]. And John, calling to him two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"...and he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them..." (Luke 7:19-23)

When the messengers of John had gone, [Jesus] began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft clothing?...What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John..." When they heard this all the people and the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John; but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him. (Luke 7:24-30)

Before [Jesus'] coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' (Acts 13:24-25)

Scobie has noted the influence of the wilderness in which John lived not only in the message John preached, but also in its tone:

In the stark simplicity of John's message, in the severity of his condemnation of sin, and in his own burning and passionate conviction, we can see the influence of the wilderness in which [he] lived.<sup>703</sup>

From these descriptions of John's ministry it becomes evident that his message had a very strong social (Luke 3:7-17) and ethical (Luke 3:18-20) dimension – all of which reinforces the prophetic character already portrayed and foretold of John in the infancy narrative.

#### ***10.4 The Death of John the Baptist***

The circumstances leading to, and the means of John's death are very briefly narrated – almost in passing as we have already noted (see also Luke 3:18-20; 9:7-9).

According to Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12, John was arrested by Herod Antipas for having dared to condemn him for marrying his brother's wife, by which act Herod contravened the teaching of Leviticus 20:21 against marriage between sisters and brothers in law. According to Mark and Matthew, therefore, John was killed on *ethical* grounds. The text of Josephus' account of the *political* fears behind Herod's decision to have John eliminated has been given earlier in this study. J.D. Crossan has summarized Josephus' account of John's death as follows:

Josephus never mentions any apocalyptic preaching but only standard Hellenistic piety. Neither does he mention any desert location or any contact with the Jordan. Yet John must have been captured within Antipas' territories, that is, either in Galilee or Perea, and, since he was taken to Machaerus, a fortress on the very southern borders of that latter area, an initial location on the Perea or desert side of the Jordan seems most plausible. In other words, Josephus has no mention of what is most politically explosive about John's rite: people cross over to the desert and are baptized in the Jordan as they return to the Promised Land. And that is dangerously close to certain millennial prophets, well known to Josephus, who, in the period between 44 and 62 C.E., invoked the desert and the Jordan to imagine a new and transcendental conquest of the Promised Land. Whatever John's intentions may have been, Antipas was not paranoid to consider a conjunction of prophet and crowds, desert and Jordan, dangerously volatile.<sup>704</sup>

<sup>703</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 48.

<sup>704</sup> J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 231-232.



In Luke-Acts John's death is presented as follows:

So, with many other exhortations, [John] preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison. (Luke 3:18-20)

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done [by Jesus], and he was perplexed because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen. Herod said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:7-9)

At first sight Luke 9:7-9 does not appear to be of a piece with the narrative about the mission of the Twelve and the feeding of the Five Thousand (Luke 7:1-6; see also Luke 10-17).<sup>705</sup> However, far from interrupting the flow of the story, the encounter actually is of a piece with the narrative; be it from the point of view of the narrative centred on Jesus, or on John. The encounter easily fits into the progression of either story. This is possible because, in essence, the encounter really addresses two aspects of the same ministry. What John had proclaimed is now confirmed by Jesus.

In brief, John's birth and ministry are described in prophetic terminology, indicating the kind of life he leads, and the role he plays in the liberation of his people. This is broadened out to imply also the role he plays in the eventual liberation of the Gentiles. John also dies, like so many of the prophets before him, for standing up for the truth, and in defence of Israel's ethical code (Luke 3:19-20; see also Leviticus 18:16). The persecution and murder of an authentic prophet was part of the package of the prophetic vocation, an expected conclusion to a faithful but unpopular reminder to the people to repent and to return to Yahweh. Jesus more than hints at this when, in Luke 13:34, he laments over Jerusalem and over how that city treats the prophets sent to it ("O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!"). John's message, like that of prophets like Amos, Hosea and others, carries a strong social dimension (Luke 3:10-14), which to a certain (indeed even a large) extent nullifies privatized religion. Religion is to be seen in relationships with God as

<sup>705</sup> So also C.G. Müller (*Mehr als ein Prophet*, 249), though Müller places the interruption within the narrative context of the mission and the return of the Twelve, thus: "Aussendung der Zwölf" – "Reflexion des Herodes" – "Rückkehr der Apostel" (:249). In an otherwise detailed study of the three people that flash in Herod's mind during his reflection in Luke 9:7-9, namely John, Elijah, and a prophet, Müller omits to draw upon the significance of Jesus' thus specifically being mistaken for John.

well as with one's fellow human beings. This was the religion of John the Baptist and of the prophets.<sup>706</sup>

## 11. JOHN THE BAPTIZER

### 11.1 *Introduction*

John the Baptist is portrayed in Luke-Acts primarily as a baptizer or a ritual purifier. The nature and purpose (or rather result) of this activity is made clear from the start: it was "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3; Acts 13:25). The significance, the means, and even the place of John's baptizing activity have received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years. The essential elements that together constitute the essence of John's understanding of baptism, namely water, spirit, and fire have, however, not been as closely studied.

These three elements of baptism are listed by John himself as:

(a) *Water:*

"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming" (Luke 3:16b, c, d)

(b) *Holy Spirit:*

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit..." (Luke 3:16e)

(c) *Fire:*

"and with fire." (Luke 3:16e)

In Luke-Acts, all three words are used in ways that at first sight give the impression that they each represent a different type of baptism, thus: baptism with water (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5a; 11:16), baptism with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5b; 19:1-7), and baptism with fire (Luke 3:16).

John, as we read in Luke-Acts, came baptizing with water, but in the full realization that there were other forms and stages of baptism, and that his own baptism did not necessarily cover all aspects of the ritual: "I baptize you with water, but there is one

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<sup>706</sup> See, for example, Amos 5:21-24.

coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". Are we then talking here of three baptisms, or of three elements (or perhaps stages) of one and the same ritual of baptism? And is there any hierarchical order in these stages? And is there any one stage that is inferior or superior to others? In order to appreciate the significance of John's baptism it may be helpful to go beyond the confines of Luke-Acts and consider a similar ritual practised elsewhere within the Judaism of a period more or less contemporaneous with that of John the Baptist. The only other such ancient ritual of which we have relatively detailed descriptions, and to which we can with some benefit compare John's baptism,<sup>707</sup> was that practised by the community of Qumran.

### ***11.2 Lustration: John the Baptist and Qumran***

We have noted above the interest generated by the discoveries at *Wadi Qumran*. Of particular interest to us, however, is the practice of ritual lustrations that appears to have formed a very important part of the life of the community of Qumran. Our interest in these ritual baths lies in their possible comparability with the baptism or lustrations of John the Baptist in the Gospels in general and in the way these lustrations are presented by the author of Luke-Acts in particular. E. Thiering<sup>708</sup> has identified one text (among others) in the Community Rule – 1QS – as particularly relevant to the current discussion, namely 1QS III.6-9. The text relates to the process of initiation and daily lustrations, in which cleansing by "water" and by "spirit" played an important role – much, indeed, as they did in John's baptism. The text of 1QS III.6-9 reads as follows:

For it is by the spirit of the true counsel of God that are atoned the paths of man, all his iniquities, so that he can look at the light of life. And it is by the holy spirit of the community, in its truth, that he is cleansed of all his iniquities. And by the spirit of uprightness and of humility his sin is atoned. And by the compliance of his soul with all the laws of God his flesh is cleansed by being sprinkled with cleansing waters and being made holy with the water of repentance.

Thiering has rightly noted that this passage deals with two objects of cleansing, namely the cleansing of "paths" (translated by some as "ways"), and the cleansing of

<sup>707</sup> For the differences between John's baptism and ritual baths of Qumran, see H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 221-225.

<sup>708</sup> E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran as a Background to New Testament Baptism", *NTS* 26 (1979-80), 266-277.

the flesh. Likewise, the passage refers to two means by which such cleansing may be achieved: by water and by Spirit.

Two instruments of cleansing related with John the Baptist, namely water and spirit, were also used at Qumran. None of this way of thinking was new to the people of the First Century C.E. – and certainly none of it would have been new to John the Baptist, nor to the author of Luke-Acts and Josephus who, it is believed, were contemporaries. In the Fourth Gospel 3:5-6, the author has Jesus say: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

1QS III.4-5 also refers to the two instruments of purification:

He [the man who spurns the decrees of God and refuses to join the community] will not become clean by the acts of atonement, nor shall he be purified by the cleansing waters, nor shall he be made holy by seas or rivers, nor shall he be purified by all the water of ablution.

The *inner cleansing*, then, in the practice of Qumran, was by spirit, referred to interchangeably as “the spirit of righteousness”, “the spirit of holiness”, “the spirit of obedience or compliance”, “the holy spirit of the Community”, “the spirit of the true counsel of God”, “the spirit of humility”, etc. The *outer cleansing* was by water, immersion, bathing, sprinkling, or similar words relative to the body’s contact with water for the purposes of purification. For the community of Qumran, as we have seen, the inner sin was considered to be of the greater gravity than the outer (external, bodily) sin.<sup>709</sup> For this reason, therefore, the inner cleansing was the more essential one, the more superior cleansing. It would not therefore need much stretch of the imagination to see how, through this interpretation of sin and the means by which it could be cleansed, it might appear natural to John the Baptist (and later on to the Gospel writers and to the early Christian community) that spirit baptism was apparently accorded pre-eminence over water baptism, and that outer (water) baptism might conceivably be considered subordinate to spirit baptism. In a conceptually and theologically similar environment to that at (or developed at) Qumran, John the

<sup>709</sup> See also B.E. Thiering, “Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran”, 266-277, for the distinction between the objects and instruments of purification.

Baptist could very well say – in the appropriate context<sup>710</sup> – “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 3:16). Thus, in the words of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts (as indeed in the Gospels generally), the cleansing, over and above his own water baptism, would be effected by the one greater than he. That spirit baptism by the greater one, in conjunction with his own water baptism, would effect both inward and outward (bodily) purification by means of two instruments – water and spirit – that would be used for the cleansing of the two objects: the inner person (= soul, spirit), as well as the outer person (= flesh, body). It is doubtful whether this observation may appropriately be extended and applied to Paul’s demand that the twelve disciples of Ephesus, who knew only John’s water baptism, be re-baptized in order also that they might receive the Holy Spirit. What we have in Acts 19:1-7 is more the product of the anti-John the Baptist polemic already noted earlier in this study, than an authentic Lucan position on the efficacy (or lack thereof) of John’s baptism in general.

Seen in this light, it becomes somewhat clear that when speaking of water baptism and spirit baptism John is not referring to two baptisms, but rather to different aspects or stages of what is in effect one single ritual of purification, performed by different agents: the one (water baptism) by himself, and the other (spirit baptism) by the expected figure who will be greater than he. In a similar vein, J.E. Taylor phrases it thus: John’s baptism “was not a package: each part had a sequential relationship to the other parts.”<sup>711</sup> Repentance is the initial and fundamental step, followed by immersion, then a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). All these represent, however, a single purificatory process. O. Cullmann has also long held that, in spite of the difference in instruments and means used, John’s baptism as well as that of early Christianity (baptism with the Holy Spirit) was one baptism. Cullmann suggests, in the words of B.E. Thiering, that

“when the Holy Spirit-giving was added as a new rite in the Christian Church, there was a danger of the two acts of baptism, the washing and the giving of the Spirit, falling apart into two different sacraments”.<sup>712</sup>

<sup>710</sup> Which, as will be noted below, was not necessarily the context within which, or point of interest from which the Gospel and New Testament writers were putting across their theology of baptism and the role of the Holy Spirit in it.

<sup>711</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 98.

<sup>712</sup> B.E. Thiering, “Qumran Initiation and New Testament Baptism”, *NTS* 27, 1980-1981, 623.



Later, in the baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts 10:44-48, Cullmann detects the same falling apart of the two acts of the one baptism.<sup>713</sup>

Water in the ritual of Qumran was used for two main purposes: it was the means by which one was cleansed and initiated into the community. It was also the means by which the repetitive purificatory baths were effected. Was John's baptism, then, an initiation or a lustration?

In answer to this question, we may note the following differences (among many others) between the practice of John the Baptist and that of Qumran:

- (a) The Qumran initiates were inducted into an organized, centralized community, while the movement of John was, so far as we can ascertain from the sources, more nebulous.
- (b) The members of the community of Qumran became distinctive by the way they dressed, ate, lived in community, and performed their religious rituals. We have no record of a similar practice on the part of the people baptized by John, apart from the note in Luke 5:33 that John's followers fasted often and offered prayers, as well as the information in Luke 11:1 that John taught his disciples to pray.
- (c) Apart from conversion, baptism, and the exhortation to live ethical lives (Luke 3:10-14), John's followers, supposedly with different attitudes and a new outlook on life, returned to their usual lives and occupations: tax-collecting, soldiering, living in consideration of one another in matters of sharing material possessions (food and clothing, etc.).
- (d) In addition, John's baptism was not performed (as the initiatory ritual at Qumran) after a long period of spiritual and physical preparation. John only required the people to repent and to receive the consequent baptism for the forgiveness of their sins, to live ethically in keeping with their professed repentance, and not to count on

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<sup>713</sup> O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 12.

having Abraham as their father as an automatic means by which they might avoid the coming judgment ("the wrath to come...the axe is [already] laid to the root of the trees" – Luke 3:7,9).

(e) The purpose of John's baptism was to avert the impending judgment, while at Qumran initiation was into a community preparing itself to eventually taking over the Jerusalem Temple which, according to CD I.1-VI.10, had, after brief returns to correct practice (after the exile), been overtaken by a "period of wickedness".

It can be seen, then, that there were significant differences between the ends of John's baptism and the purposes of the initiation and lustrations of Qumran. In Qumran there was a rite of initiation into the community, practised once a year (1QS I.16-II.25), and part of which involved entry into the water of purification (1QS V, VIII, XIII). After the initiation, there were repeated purifications (1QS III.4-6; VI.18-23).<sup>714</sup> 1QS VI.8-23 describes in part the initiatory process thus:

This is the Rule for the session of the Many [for the initiates]. Each one by his rank: the priests will sit down first, the elders next and the remainder of all the people will sit down in order of rank. And following the same system they shall be questioned with regard to judgment, all counsel and any matter referred to the Many so that each can impart his knowledge to the council of the Community...No-one should talk during the speech of his fellow before his brother has finished speaking...And neither should he speak before one whose rank is listed before his own. Whoever is questioned should speak in his turn. And in the session of the Many no-one should utter anything without the consent of the Many, save the Inspector of the Many. And anyone who has something to say to the Many but is not in the position of one who is asking questions to the Community council, that man should stand up and say: "I have something to say to the Many". If they tell him to, he should speak. And anyone from Israel who freely volunteers to enroll in the council of the Community, the man appointed at the head of the Many shall test him with regard to his insight and his deeds. If he suits the discipline he shall let him enter into the covenant so that he can revert to the truth and shun all injustice, and he shall teach him all the precepts of the Community. And then, when he comes in to stand in front of the Many, they shall be questioned, all of them, concerning his affairs. And depending on the outcome of the lot in the council of the Many he shall be included or excluded. When he is included in the Community council, he must not touch the pure food of the Many until they test him about his spirit and about his deeds, until he has completed a full year; neither should he share in the possession of the Many. When he has completed a year within the Community, the Many will be questioned about his affairs, concerning his insight and his deeds in connection with the law. And if the lot results in him entering the inner council of the Community according to the priests and the majority of the men of their covenant, his possessions and his earnings will also be joined at the hand of the Inspector of the earnings of the Many. And they shall credit it to his account, but they shall not use it for the Many. He must not

<sup>714</sup> See also Josephus, *War* ii.129, 138; and CD X.12-14. See further B.E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran", 270-271, concerning the stages of initiation at Qumran.

touch the drink of the Many until he completes a second year among the men of the Community. And when this second year is complete he will be examined by command of the Many. And if the lot results in him joining the Community, they shall enter him in the order of his rank among his brothers for the law, for the judgment, for purity and for the placing of his possessions. And his advice will be for the Community as will his judgment.

When this is read in relation to some of the necessary conditions related to John's ritual as described by the author of Luke-Acts, namely

Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father", for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise...Collect no more than is appointed you...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages, (Luke 3: 8-14)

it becomes clear that John's baptism was not, and never was intended to be, a rite of initiation. John's expectation was simply that the people, having repented, would lead ethical lives in order to "flee from the wrath to come" – the eschatological judgment of which all lived in expectation (Luke 3:7). In addition, Luke makes it clear that John's baptism, while aimed at the restoration of Israel as a whole as the true people of God, and not just of an exclusive group, was also meant to draw into this fold any 'tree' or 'stone' that bore fruits that befitted repentance (Luke 3:8-9). Granted, the restoration of the true Israel was also the general aim of the community of Qumran, but they understood that 'true' Israel in a very exclusive sense as consisting of themselves alone.

We are still, however, left with a question regarding a third element of baptism that John the Baptist refers to. He speaks of baptism by water, by Spirit, "and *fire*"<sup>715</sup> (Luke 3.16). What is this fire baptism of which John speaks, and where might we turn for a comparable explanation?

It appears that, for a simile, we must look beyond Qumran (without ignoring that comparison altogether) and try to determine a meaning from both the Old Testament and the New. What is striking about the three elements (water – spirit – fire) in both sources is that they are often spoken of in liquid terms such as pouring, raining, and

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<sup>715</sup> Our italics.

even sprinkling. In the Old Testament, the likening of spirit to water is to be seen, for example, at Isaiah 44:3:

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring,

and in Ezekiel 36:25-27:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

In 1QS IV.18-22 words connected with water are used for the spirit. The word "sprinkle" is used both of water washing in 1QS III.6-9 and also of spirit washing in 1QS IV.18-22. The word "purify" which is at times used in relation with spirit washing is not connected with water washing only: Psalm 51:9 (hyssop); Leviticus 16:19 (blood); Ezekiel 39:12; Malachi 3:3. In Acts 2:17, Peter uses a quotation from Joel 3:1-5 to explain the significance of the descent of the Holy Spirit on all those present on the day of Pentecost: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh".

In respect of fire, it is spoken of in liquid terms in some of the following instances: fire and sulphur rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24); in Psalm 11:6, coals of fire and sulphur and a scorching wind will rain down on the wicked; likewise in Psalm 18:12, Yahweh is shown as a mighty hero who rains hailstones and fire through the clouds; in Revelations 8:7, hail and fire mixed with blood are 'thrown' (also to be understood in the sense of 'poured') from heaven to burn up a third of the earth; while in Revelations 20:14 fire is described as being collected into a lake which brings death; in Revelation 20:15, the fate of any who dare to add to what has been revealed and written in the book of Revelations is that they will have their place "in the lake that burns with fire".

Thus, in addition to purifying, baptism also involves a pouring of water, spirit, and fire. In any case, fire is very much an instrument of cleansing and purification: gold is purified by fire; the scourge of Sodom and Gomorrah was purified by fire in a context in which the idea of divine judgment by means of fire is developed;<sup>716</sup> God purified his wayward people through the fire of destruction leading to the exile. Thus fire is a means of divine judgment and an agent for the removal of impurities. In the context of divine judgment,

the function of ... fire is to consume the wicked, not to destroy the world, but as the idea of a universal, eschatological judgment developed...it is not surprising that the idea of judgment by fire should develop into the expectation of a universal conflagration, especially when the future universal judgment was envisaged by analogy with the Flood as a universal judgment of the past.<sup>717</sup>

In the context of baptism, the fire that John the Baptist refers to symbolizes the ultimate cleansing, the ultimate conversion, purification and purging. This is not to question the efficaciousness of water baptism or spirit baptism, but to complement and seal them as a unitive process in an irrevocable way. And it is also this last aspect that makes us wary of considering John's baptism as a once-off, unrepeatable act: for even where fire is concerned, it may take (as is evident in the history of Israel) a number of 'firings' to effect the desired level of purity.

Fire is the ultimate cleanser, both inwardly and outwardly. Where water washes only the outside, and the spirit purifies only the inside, fire is all-consuming: it combines both forms of purification as it cleanses at once both the spirit and the flesh. John baptizes externally with water, the coming one will baptize internally with the spirit, but he will set a seal over and bring to conclusion the entire ritual by a fire baptism.

There is yet another element of fire that may be relevant to the current discussion. In the Old Testament fire very often symbolizes the presence of Yahweh. We recall the well-known fire epiphanies such as Genesis 15:17; Exodus 3:2-6; 13:21; 19:18, and others. According to Old Testament beliefs, it was not unusual for God to manifest himself in fiery appearances. This belief extends to the significance of holocaust

<sup>716</sup> See the further application of the idea of divine judgment by fire in Isaiah 51:6; 65:17; 66:15-24; 33:11-12.

<sup>717</sup> R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Waco, Word, 1983, 300. See further the treatment of this theme (i.e. fire as a means of divine judgment) in P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism, Judaism-Christianity*, 227-251.



offerings. What is offered up on fire as a burnt holocaust has been apportioned to Yahweh. It now belongs in the divine sphere. One baptized by fire is thus also one who now lives in the sphere of the divine. Baptism by water, spirit, and fire has therefore the element of setting the baptized person apart for Yahweh. As Paul says in a different context: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which you have from God? You are no longer your own" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The fire baptism sets one apart as no longer belonging to the human or material sphere, but to the sphere of the divine, thereby completing the cycle of repentance that John the Baptist has been calling for from the beginning.

Once again, therefore, the three elements that John the Baptist refers to in connection with baptism (water – spirit – fire) do not represent three baptisms, but three processes of the same ritual. John acknowledges that his water baptism – touching as it does only the external flesh – is to be followed by other more thorough stages of baptism that would complement his own by touching upon those aspects of the penitent's life not covered by his own. Therefore, rather than speaking of the inferiority of John's water baptism (as a questionable exegesis of Acts 19:1-7 would lead us to conclude), we should rather speak of John's humility in acknowledging that his ritual of water baptism was but one element within the entire totality of the staggered ritual of baptism and the process of purification.

### ***11.3 The Location of Sin and the Objects of Cleansing***

Concerning the objects of the cleansing, the purification of the flesh follows inward penitence. In other words, the cleansing of the flesh symbolizes internal purity: "by the compliance of his soul...his flesh is cleansed by being sprinkled with cleansing waters" (1QS III.8-9). Sin is understood to dwell in the mind, that is to say in the inner part of a person, of which the flesh is but the outer form. The real guilt for sin, therefore, is thus not carried primarily by the flesh. The real guilt is inward. As Thiering says: "The flesh is only secondarily impure, the real guilt is inward...There are, then, two locations of sin, one primary and one secondary...The inner man is the

primary location, the outer man is the flesh, the secondary."<sup>718</sup> In other words, "The flesh does not carry the real guilt, but is defiled as a result of the inner activity."<sup>719</sup>

The distinction drawn here in the dual location of sin is not new. It can be compared with Matthew 5:21-22:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

The same distinction can also be compared with Matthew 5:27-28:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

According to these texts murder and adultery are committed in the heart. The fleshly action is not the sphere in which guilt essentially resides. The same comparison can be seen at Mark 7:20-23:

And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Likewise, Hebrews 10:22 makes a distinction between the two locations of sin and the two instruments necessary for that sin's purification: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water". Several other New Testament texts similarly draw this distinction: Mark 7:20-23 and Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28 as already noted; 1 Corinthians 3:1: "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ"; and Hebrews 10:19-31:

<sup>718</sup> E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran", 268.

<sup>719</sup> E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran", 268.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy "on the testimony of two or three witnesses." How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "the Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,

In such cases as those indicated here, cleansing obviously becomes necessary for both locations of uncleanness, or for both objects of sin: for the inner intention that generates it, as well as for the external or physical actuation. However, given the different locations to be cleansed (the inner being, and the external flesh), different means of cleansing or purification are necessary.

Josephus' description of John's baptism carries the same distinction: "They must not use it [baptismal ablution] to gain pardon for whatever sins they had committed, but as a sanctification of the body, the soul being already cleansed by righteousness."<sup>720</sup> Josephus thus follows the distinction of 'soul sin' and 'body sin' in John's baptism, with the same distinction regarding purification: washing for the body, and cleansing by righteousness for the soul.

The community of Qumran was aware of the dual location of sin: the "soul" representing the inner person and the seat of the person's being, as well as the "flesh". The inner person is cleansed by the spirit, and the outer person is cleansed by water. 1QS III.6-9 appears, in which we agree with Thiering, to make it clear that "Water cleansing is only appropriate to the outer man. The inner man, who is spirit, can only be cleansed by spirit".<sup>721</sup>

<sup>720</sup> *Ant.* xviii.117.

<sup>721</sup> E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran", 268.

In Qumran, the inner virtue (spirit of uprightness, etc.) takes the place of sacrifice on the basis of texts such as 1 Samuel 15:22 (obedience is better than sacrifice). What is new in Qumran is that inward sin is held to defile the flesh – that is, to make it ritually unclean. In the words of Scobie: “In the scrolls...moral offences render a man ritually unclean and therefore require rites of ablutions”.<sup>722</sup> Or, according to Leaney, the “sect is the first group within Judaism of whom we know who believed that moral failure...incurred ritual defilement”,<sup>723</sup> or again, “moral or ceremonial defilement...contaminates the physical body, and...God’s spirit must cleanse the body as well as the spirit of man (the two being integrated)”.<sup>724</sup>

We may conclude this section by noting that the possible connections between the illustrations of Qumran (of water and spirit), and those of the New Testament have aroused the interest of a great many scholars, and the same links have been the subject of numerous studies.<sup>725</sup> The relationship between water baptism and Spirit baptism as practised and understood at Qumran may perhaps help place in perspective certain issues regarding the way in which the author of Luke-Acts has described John’s baptism by water and by the Spirit. More importantly still, it may help in clarifying whether Luke has John speaking of two (or three) baptisms, as well as whether one form of the baptismal ritual was inferior or superior to the other. Notwithstanding the episode recounted in Acts 19:1-7, it does not seem appropriate to think of the author of Luke-Acts as considering that John’s water baptism was inferior to the Spirit baptism of Jesus. Each form applied to the different parts that make up the totality of a spiritual being (purified by the Spirit) and a physical being (purified by water). To use common parlance: it is a division of labour. Or, as Paul would say, “I planted,

<sup>722</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 64.

<sup>723</sup> A.R.C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and its Meaning*, 139.

<sup>724</sup> A.R.C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and its Meaning*, 158.

<sup>725</sup> For example O. Betz, “Was John the Baptist an Essene?” in H. Shanks (ed.), *Understanding the Dead Sea Scroll*, 205-214; M. Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*; W.H. Brownlee, “John the Baptist in the Light of Ancient Scrolls”, *Int* 9 (1955), 71-90; D. Flusser, “The Magnificat, the Benedictus and the War Scroll” in D. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, Jerusalem, Magnes, 1988, 126-149; M.A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; W.S. LaSor, “The Messianic Idea in Qumran” in M. Ben-Horin, B.D. Weinryb, S. Zeitlin (eds.), *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, Leiden, Brill, 1962, 343-364; J.R. Mantey, “Baptism in the Dead Sea Manual of Discipline”, *RevExp* 51 (1951), 522-527; J. Neusner, 1973, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism*; J. Pyrké, “John the Baptist and the Qumran Community”, *RevQ* 4 (1964), 483-496; H.H. Rowley, “The Baptism of John and the Qumran Sect” in A.J.B. Higgins (ed.), *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson*, Manchester, University Press, 1959, 218-229; E.F. Sutcliffe, “Baptism and Baptismal Rites at Qumran”, *HeyJ* 1 (1960), 48-65; B.E. Thiering, “Qumran Initiation and New Testament Baptism”, *NTS* 27 (1980-1981), 615-631.

Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6). The process or means may be different, or they might involve a cumulative collection of processes, but the essence of the ritual itself remains one and essentially indivisible. We may cautiously accept, as an analogy, that the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) programme that is practised at various stages of initiation into the Roman Catholic Church – which stages do not individually but rather collectively lead to full communion and full membership in the Church – is not essentially dissimilar to the baptismal stages as envisaged in the totality of the ritual by John the Baptist, Jesus, and the early Christians.

Two aspects seem to emerge when considering the various forms of 'baptism' or, more correctly, ritual washing or bathing as practiced by the various baptist movements – especially by the Qumran community – when read according to Luke's presentation of John's baptism. Firstly, the cleansing or ritual washing of the baptist movements was meant to effect purification from a *particular* in contrast to a general condition. Secondly, so far as we are able to gather from our sources, John's baptism was not an *initiation* into an exclusive movement or organization. John's baptism did not entitle one to membership or special status within a 'counterworld', to borrow a term from E.W. Stegemann and W. Stegemann.<sup>726</sup> Rather, those who accepted baptism were those who would not be 'chopped down' on the imminent day of judgment (Luke 3:9).

## 12. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND REPENTANCE

### 12.1 *Repentance in Luke-Acts*<sup>727</sup>

A key concept in John's message – and one that is further developed in the succeeding narrative from the Third Gospel through to the Acts of the Apostles – is encapsulated in the word "repentance". G.D. Nave has noted that this word (and its various Greek cognates) occurs more frequently in Luke-Acts than in any other writing in the New Testament.<sup>728</sup> This clearly indicates a particular significance that

<sup>726</sup> E.W. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 186.

<sup>727</sup> What follows is a very brief treatment of this sub-topic, since the significance of repentance in Luke-Acts has been amply treated in the work of G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*.

<sup>728</sup> G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 3.



the author of Luke-Acts attaches to this word. R.C. Tannehill expresses the significance of repentance for the author of Luke-Acts thus:

John initiates a mission that will continue throughout Luke-Acts and reach out to the whole world...Jesus and his witnesses, in fact, take over and continue the message of John the Baptist, and the narrator sometimes uses phrases which remind us of this fact. The task of "proclaiming...repentance for release of sins" (3:3) remains central throughout Luke-Acts. In Nazareth Jesus indicates that he has been called to "proclaim release" (4:18), and the scenes in 5:17-32 in which Jesus asserts his authority to "release sins" and defends his mission "to call...sinners to repentance" are linked by the narrator to a series of later scenes which keep this important aspect of Jesus' [and John's] mission before the reader.<sup>729</sup>

If the purpose of John's preaching could be expressed in a few words, they would be 'the call to repentance'. This call to repentance has already been closely connected with John in the birth narrative: "he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God...[and] turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (Luke 1:16-17). John's task from his birth is to "make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17); John will "go before the Lord, to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76-77). It is in this way that John fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah: John prepares the way of the Lord by preparing the people through repentance,<sup>730</sup> or, in the words of G.D. Nave, "repentance is analogous to the filling in of valleys, the leveling of hills and mountains, the straightening of crooked places and the smoothing out of rough places."<sup>731</sup> Repentance represents a change in thinking, a change of attitude that leads to a change in behaviour and way of life. G.D. Nave expresses the significance of this change thus:

The motif of repentance plays a central role in both the development of the story in Luke-Acts and the message conveyed by Luke-Acts. Repentance is not simply a change in thinking that represents an appropriate response to inappropriate thoughts and actions; repentance is the necessary change in thinking and behaviour required of individuals in order to help fulfill God's plan of universal salvation and to help establish a community composed of all people.<sup>732</sup>

John makes it clear that baptism alone, without the accompanying signs of true penitence (what John calls the "fruits of repentance") is not sufficient to save one from the coming judgment. In as much as being Abraham's descendents is not an

<sup>729</sup> R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 48-49.

<sup>730</sup> So also R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 48-49.

<sup>731</sup> G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 147.

<sup>732</sup> G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 147.

automatic qualification for salvation, neither is a baptism that does not bear concrete fruits of repentance. John exhorts his audience to repent, and to show that repentance by bearing visible fruits: "bear fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3:8). In his insistence on a baptism of repentance that is verified by "fruits" John displays an understanding of baptism or ritual washing that is similar to that of the community of Qumran. According to 1QS 5:13-15 the Qumran community believed that, in and of itself, ritual washing did not have complete cleansing power; rather cleansing was contingent upon a change of behaviour: "They shall not enter the water to share in the pure meal of the saints, for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn from their evil ways." For the person who did not show a change of behaviour, no amount of washing ("neither by seas or rivers" – 1QS 3:3-12) could purify him. The ritual ablutions were effective only if there was a change of behaviour, a turning away from "evil ways".

For John, repentance and the forgiveness of sins are the only insurance against "the wrath to come", and the external symbol to signify this repentance is baptism, while the internal symbol is a change in attitude, a conversion that is in turn externally visible in ethical deeds such as concern for one's neighbour (sharing food and clothing – Luke 3:11), desisting from extortionate behaviour (Luke 3:13), and from robbery and violence (Luke 3:14). The repentance that John tries to inculcate in his audience is a drastic one; as drastic a transformation as the leveling of a terrain that obstructs travel.<sup>733</sup>

In the introduction to his ministry, John is cast in the mode of a prophet, as he already has been in the birth narrative (Luke 1:17), and the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5 has been applied to him. True to prophetic form, therefore, John's message is an exhortation to repent: "Repent, turn back from your evil ways. Why die, House of Israel?", Yahweh exhorts the wayward Israelites in Ezekiel 33:11; "Turn back to me and you will be saved", pleads Yahweh in Isaiah 45:22; "Turn back, each one of you, from your evil behaviour and amend your actions [...] and you will go on living on the soil I gave to you and your ancestors", Yahweh says through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 35:15, cf. 18:11). Like the prophets before him, John believed (as indeed did all the people of his time)

<sup>733</sup> See also R.C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, 48.

in an imminent judgment of God – a judgment that Jesus, for example, believes will occur already “in this generation” (Luke 21:29-32). Repentance and baptism (accompanied by the necessary “fruits” in social and ethical conversion) were, for John, the means by which salvation could be assured on the day of judgment.

The idea of an impending divine judgment, and the need to live in preparation for it is common in Luke-Acts, and it forms one of the bases for Jesus’ teaching, whether in exhortations or through parables. This idea of the judgment to come and the need to be ready for it is expressed through the motifs of watchfulness or being awake, since the day and the hour of the event are unknown. Thus, for example, the watchful servant who stays alert and ready for the arrival of the master (Luke 12:35-48). The ability to read the signs of the times is also related to the idea of being prepared and ready (Luke 12:54-56). Another motif used by Jesus that harks back to John’s baptism is that of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9, in comparison with Luke 3:8, 9). The urgency of the need to be ready and prepared is stressed by Jesus who believes that judgment will occur, as we have already noted, “in this generation” (Luke 21:29-32), and that therefore the people should take care “that that day does not catch [them] by surprise” (Luke 21: 34-36). Though Jesus uses these motifs in relation to the coming of the Kingdom of God, that event is itself inseparably connected to judgment, for example in Matthew 25:31-46, a judgment in relation to the fruits of repentance; in the Third Gospel: sharing food and clothing with the poor, not cheating others, and not robbing them, while in Matthew: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, visiting the sick and those in prison. These, in John’s words, are the “fruits that befit repentance”.

Repentance is significant in yet another way: it is associated with the beginning of the Gospel. The author of Luke-Acts understands the preaching of John to be the beginning of the Gospel: “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Luke 16:16; Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24). At the heart of John’s message was, as we have already noted, the exhortation to repentance. Thus repentance is closely associated with entering the kingdom of God, which is to say obtaining salvation. That, in the final analysis, is the purpose of John’s baptism.

G.D. Nave indicates still yet another way in which repentance is significant for the author of Luke-Acts: Repentance helps the author to emphasize the universality of salvation, a theme with which the author is concerned in relation to John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles. The inclusion of tax collectors ("who comprised one of the most socially despised segments of the population") and soldiers among those who repent and seek baptism serves to underline the fact that everyone is now eligible to become a member in the community of God's people: "No one is doomed merely on the basis of who they are, but everyone is capable of receiving forgiveness and escaping the wrath to come."<sup>734</sup>

### ***12.2 John the Baptist on Repentance***<sup>735</sup>

John's teaching on repentance is presented as a unit in Luke's Gospel as follows:

[John] said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Luke 3:7-9).

The reader of this text is not surprised at John's insistence on repentance, for it will be borne in mind that, already before he was born, it was foretold of him that he would "turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16).

Jesus' teaching on repentance is, on the other hand, spread out over the Third Gospel and Acts. Often this teaching is expressed not only in word but in deed. The story of the woman who was a sinner in Luke 7:36-50 is a case in point. The story is set in a context of other stories related to the theme of repentance and forgiveness, even though neither the word 'repentance' nor any of its cognates are used. The actions of the woman towards Jesus (weeping and wetting Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping her tears off Jesus' feet with her hair, kissing Jesus' feet, and anointing them with ointment) are, however, clearly penitential, for which Jesus forgives her sins, to the scandalized surprise of those who were at table with him. Likewise, the rejoicing over repentant people who turn from their ways and 'return' is expressed in a series of

<sup>734</sup> G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 220.

<sup>735</sup> See also J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition", 99-106.

parables that Jesus gives in Luke 15:3-32 (the parable of the lost sheep and the joy that results in its being found – Luke 15:3-7; the finding of the lost coin – Luke 15:8-10; and the parable of the prodigal son – Luke 15:11-32).

In Luke 13:6-9 Jesus tells a parable that invites his hearers to repentance. While John invites his audience to “bear fruits that befit repentance” (Luke 3:8), and speaks of the axe already having been laid to the root of the trees, Jesus speaks of a barren tree that will, after being given another chance and still bearing no fruit, be cut down. Where John, in tones almost of indignation and outrage refers to the unrepentant people of his time in harsh (and even insulting) terms such as a “brood of vipers”, Jesus is himself not averse to referring to the hard-hearted among his hearers in equally unacceptable language such as “hypocrites” (Luke 12:56), “unmarked graves which are not seen, over which people walk without knowing it” (Luke 11:44), “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27); “serpents, brood of vipers” (Matthew 23:33).

During John’s ministry, the tax collectors are twice given as examples of repentance (Luke 3:12 and 7:29). In the same way, tax collectors are never far away in Jesus’ ministry. For example, in Luke 15:1-3, tax collectors and sinners gather around Jesus to listen to him, but the Pharisees complain that Jesus welcomes sinners. Tax collectors are thus presented, both in John’s and Jesus’ ministries, as those willing to repent, while the Pharisees and lawyers “rejected the purpose of God for themselves” by not accepting John’s baptism (Luke 7:30). And it is not only that the Pharisees and lawyers refuse God’s plan for themselves. They also stand in the way of those who genuinely want to repent and save themselves; they “hold the key of knowledge” and hinder those who want to enter (Luke 11:52). The favourable light in which tax collectors are held by Jesus is shown also in Luke 18:9-14, in the parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble, penitent tax collector who goes home at rights with God. Tax collectors are, in a number of ways, placed in better light than are the Pharisees and the lawyers because, in most instances in which they are mentioned in the context of John’s ministry (for example in Luke 3:12; 7:29) they are shown to be more receptive to his message, while the Pharisees are not. By accepting those considered to be unclean, or to be sinners, John shows that salvation is open to all who repent. It is no longer the exclusive or particularistic claim to having “Abraham as our father” (Luke 3: 8) that qualifies one for salvation, but repentance is the new



standard. This universalistic view, in its own way, sets the foundation for the mission to the Gentiles, a key Lucan theme with which Acts is mostly concerned. Later on, Paul will say in his letter to the Romans that Abraham is the ancestor of all who believe (Romans 4:11-12; 16-17), and that all are justified by faith, and no longer only by human descent from Abraham (Romans 5:1-11).

These few examples show how, for both John the Baptist and Jesus, repentance was the single most important key to salvation at the eschatological judgment, as well as for entry into the kingdom of God. Where John's exhortation to repentance is terse and straight to the point, Jesus uses parables. Jesus is also shown in contexts in which, while the word 'repentance' as such is perhaps not used, the need for repentance and forgiveness is nonetheless implicit.

A point on which most traditions on John are agreed is that he preached a baptism of repentance. In Luke-Acts John is associated with repentance even before he is born: "he will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17). For John, the salvation of Israel (whatever form that 'Israel' might take) lay in the well known prophetic exhortation to "return to Yahweh".<sup>736</sup> In John's longest reported speech in Luke-Acts there are three concepts closely related with the idea of repentance: the axe having been laid to the roots of the tree, the winnowing fork to separate the grain from the chaff, and baptism by fire. John uses metaphors (or 'metonyms'<sup>737</sup>) that are very familiar to his audience, and all refer to repentance or the need thereof.

In John's teaching, repentance is in view of God's judgment of Israel on "the day of wrath" (Luke 3:8), and repentance is also closely tied to Israel's identity. By the same token, John's own modified definition of Israel becomes clear. The position is put in clearer light by J.A. Draper who notes that

offspring of snakes is contrasted with offspring of Abraham...The opposition raises the question, who are the true children of Abraham: is membership of the covenant people a matter of physical descent, or is it the result of obedience?...If the physical

<sup>736</sup> See, for example, Hosea 6:1; 14:2-3; Ezekiel 18:32; Jeremiah 3:12-14, 22; Isaiah 31:6.

<sup>737</sup> See J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition", 98.

descendants of Abraham are disobedient, then God can raise up children from the stones.<sup>738</sup>

The word 'wilderness' is used to further connect John with repentance and salvation or restoration on the day of judgment. J.A. Draper expresses it thus:

"Wilderness" is a key theme in the cultural sphere of Israel...It refers to the desert wanderings of Israel after they were delivered from Egypt...However, the desert wanderings also come to be a sign of hope for the renewal of Israel, since they represent the time of the Mosaic covenant and promise. Hence, Isaiah takes up the theme in 40:3-5, of preparation for the coming of the Lord in the wilderness...The Dead Sea Scrolls also use the reference to preparation in the wilderness as the foundational text of the community (1QS 8:12-16; 9:19-21).<sup>739</sup>

For John, repentance and obedience to the prophets are tied to belonging to Israel, and lack of repentance to exclusion from Israel. Repentance and obedience thus determine one's identity as well as assurance of salvation on the Day of Judgment.<sup>740</sup>

### 13 THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF JOHN'S PROCLAMATION<sup>741</sup>

#### 13.1 Introduction

The social dimension of the message preached by John the Baptist in the section Luke 3:8-14 is, in fact, quite basic.

The social elements of John's proclamation are addressed to three groups of people:

#### (a) To the Multitudes:

"Bear fruits that befit repentance...even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise..."

#### (b) To the Tax collectors:

"Collect no more than is appointed you..."

#### (c) To the Soldiers:

"Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

<sup>738</sup> J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition", 99.

<sup>739</sup> J.A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Tradition", 101.

<sup>740</sup> See also at Acts 3:22-23.

<sup>741</sup> R.J. Cassidy has outlined the socio-political aspects of Luke-Acts in two works that highlight the socio-political environment of Palestine in Jesus' (and John's) time. See his *Jesus, Politics, and Society*, as well as *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles*. Of particular significance to this topic is the socio-scientific study by H. Moxnes in *The Economy of the Kingdom*.

Eventually they are all grouped together simply as “the people” (Luke 3:15, 18). One particular individual, however, that John addressed in apparently not very positive terms is named: Herod the tetrarch<sup>742</sup> (Luke 3:19-20; 9:7-9). The universal interests of the author of Luke-Acts are immediately evident in the composition of John’s audience. Though only three categories of people are mentioned, they actually represent a very wide spectrum of the society of John’s time.

John’s social concern was among the points admired most by Josephus. The demand by John that people should live righteous lives is taken up by Josephus who, anxious in his *Antiquities of the Jews* to portray Judaism as a religion with high moral standards, concentrates almost entirely on this aspect of John’s teaching. Josephus writes that John “exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God”.<sup>743</sup>

### 13.2 John the Baptist’s Audience

#### 13.2.1 The Multitudes

The reference to having “Abraham as our father” (Luke 3:8) appears to identify the multitudes as Jews. The fact that “the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ” (Luke 3:15) also supports the supposition that John’s audience was Jewish.<sup>744</sup> The reference to an eschatological judgment (“the wrath to come” – Luke 3:7; “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor...” – Luke 3:17) recalls, as we have noted above, the expectation of many Jews, both mainstream and sectarian (including John and Jesus and their followers, and the community of Qumran) of a

<sup>742</sup> About whom see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 340-353. See also Josephus, *Ant.* xviii.2, 4-5, 7; *War* ii.6, 9. In the New Testament, see Mark 6:14-29; Mt. 14:1-12; Luke 3:19-20; 9:7-9; 13:31-32; 23:6-12. The frequent occurrences in Luke are in keeping with his narrative style, in which events in Luke-Acts are related to Roman and world history though, as seen earlier, the author of Luke-Acts has been noted to be at times quite factually inaccurate, which has also been noted of greater historians such as Flavius Josephus.

<sup>743</sup> *Ant.* xviii.5.

<sup>744</sup> Josephus makes reference to the Jewish inhabitants of Peraea in *Ant.* xx.1. This is the region east of the Jordan in which John the Baptist exercised his ministry.

decisive act of God, through his messiah or messiahs,<sup>745</sup> for the salvation of the righteous or of the 'true' Israel.

This entire supposition, however, may be tempered by considerations of the geographical location of John's activities. If he were in the region east of the Jordan<sup>746</sup> as is generally believed, might it not be conceivable that his audience may perhaps not have been entirely Jewish? After all, even though John makes a reference to having "Abraham as our father" in talking to his audience, not only the Jewish people in the region had a claim on Abraham as their father. The descendants of the Ishmaelites, for example, could also justifiably trace their descent directly to Abraham and thus identify fully with John's reference to "we have Abraham as our father" (Luke 3:8). It will be recalled that in Genesis 16, childless Sarah gives Abraham her Egyptian maid Hagar to produce a son for himself, then drives out the pregnant maid when she makes fun of her mistress' childlessness. Hagar bears her son (= Abraham's son) and calls him Ishmael (Genesis 16:15-16; 17:23-27). In due course,

<sup>745</sup> We have noted that the Qumran sectarians apparently lived in expectation of two, or possibly three Messiahs: a Messiah of Aaron (that is to say a Priest-Messiah), and a Messiah of Israel (that is to say a national or Royal Messiah to take over the reigns of government and the direction of national affairs). These two messiahs are referred to in 1QS IX.11; 4Q285; 4Q521. On the other hand, 4Q175 appears to indicate the expectation of yet another Messiah: a prophetic Messiah. For further reading on the Messiahs expected by the community of Qumran, see G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 86-87; R. Eisenman & M. Wise, *Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 17; 19-25; 84-85; 226.

<sup>746</sup> Though, according to E. Schürer (*The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1), "The scene of the baptist's activity may have been mostly on the West bank of the Jordan, and therefore in Judea. He did, however, also operate on the East bank, in Peraea, as is shown not only by the Fourth Gospel (1:28; 3:26; 10:40) but especially by the fact of his arrest by Antipas." (:345, n.21).

On the other hand, some works representing the most recent scholarship dispute that John ever ministered west of the Jordan. In a very convincing discussion on the matter, H. Stegemann maintains in his *The Library of Qumran* that "John the Baptist was never active west of the Jordan" (:213). He notes further that "only because John's place of baptism was on the east bank of the Jordan in Perea, and thus within the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, could Antipas have the Baptist, whom he found disagreeable, arrested and put to death without opposition from the other side of the river. There is no doubt whatever of this geographical datum. Indeed, it is at the same time the most important starting point for an understanding of John the Baptist as a whole" (:213. See also 225). Note also on page 214 of the same book, where the significance of the east bank of the Jordan for both John as well as the Jewish people is highlighted: "The actual background for John's peculiar choice of location is revealed by biblical tradition alone. John had chosen as the place of his entry upon the public scene precisely that location, opposite Jericho, where Joshua had once led the people of Israel across the Jordan into the Holy Land (Josh. 4:13, 19). His choice of the *east bank* of the Jordan as the place of his activity, then, corresponded to Israel's situation immediately *before* the crossing of the river. Thus the Baptist's public appearance was analogous to Israel's life, after the flight from Egypt, 'in the desert,' before the entry into the Promised Land, where only in the future would everything that God had once promised his chosen people through Moses on Mount Sinai become a reality.

In a kind of symbolic, prophetic manipulation of signs, John was thereby placing the people of Israel at the transition to the future time of salvation, corresponding to that of the desert generation of Israel that had indeed already been promised salvation, but whose members had to perish before their children could reach the sacred goal" (:214-215. See also pages 220 and 223). For the significance of the wilderness, see further C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 41-48.

Ishmael's descendants become one of the "many nations" that Abraham has been promised in Genesis 15:1-6 and 17:4 to be their father. Ishmael in his turn receives a separate promise of many descendants and of being a great nation (Genesis 21:13). Ishmael initially makes his home in the desert of Paran – the northern desert regions of the Sinai Peninsula – together with his Egyptian wife (Genesis 21:20-21). From the Sinai Peninsula, Ishmael's descendants – now commonly known as Ishmaelites – spread throughout and control the vast deserts of Arabia as traders in incense and spices, and as breeders of camels. Of their paternal descent there was no question: they had Abraham as their father.<sup>747</sup>

The presence of the soldiers – who were probably not Jews (see below) – would also suggest a largely but not exclusively Jewish audience that was addressed by John the Baptist. The reference to the coming judgment and to the messiah would have had the same relevance to the Jewish members of the audience as a specific group, as would have the reference to collecting no more than was appointed to the tax collectors also as a specific target group within the multitude. It seems, therefore, not altogether out of place to have as broad a perspective as possible on the likely composition of the multitudes that came to John, though we can readily accept that most of them would have been Jews.

Another possibility regarding the composition of the 'multitudes' is suggested by H. Stegemann's description of what he has identified as the precise location of John's baptism, namely a section of the Jordan at which contact and intermingling between Jews and Gentiles was apparently so commonplace that it would not have been to be wondered at to find a fair number of Gentiles attracted to (or at least curious about) John's baptizing activity. Stegemann says:

At the place where John baptized, an old trade route crosses the Jordan, stretching from Jerusalem through Jericho into the region east of the river. At low water, fords, and at other times ferries, provided the means of transporting a great deal of traffic in persons and goods every day, just as occurs today with the Allenby Bridge – which lies just a little to the north – between Jordan and the Palestinian West Bank. Here, John could mightily prick the conscience of all those Jews he caught making business trips on the Sabbath; those who as toll collectors on the border demanded more than

<sup>747</sup> See further E.A. Knauf, "Ishmaelites", *ABD* 3 (1992), 513-520.



they were entitled to; or those who as soldiers busied themselves with their own enrichment through military action in the neighboring territory (cf. Luke 3:10-14).<sup>748</sup>

John's exhortation to the multitudes: "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Luke 3:11) recalls the social doctrine of a prophet like Amos (for example at 5:10-13; 8:4-8), while at the same time this concern for others represents the "fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3:8). It is clear in John's message that one who has repented and has been baptized cannot do otherwise. Conversion has very specific ethical, moral and social implications that go with it. A conversion without the visible and external "fruits" of charity and social concern would be as worthless as the kind of faith that James pours scorn on:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)<sup>749</sup>

R.J. Cassidy has noted that "in regard to the subject of material possessions, the basic approach of Luke's Jesus is that surplus possessions, possessions over and above what is necessary for one's life, are dangerous for true discipleship."<sup>750</sup> This is the original conviction of John the Baptist, hence his exhortation to share material goods. Or, in the words of H. Moxnes, "People with resources are urged to be generous without limit...they are asked to perform *redistribution*".<sup>751</sup> John's social doctrine is in part very much that of the author of Luke-Acts, and we will see how, in comparing John with Jesus, our author frequently has these two protagonists say or do things in ways in which social concern for one's neighbour is constantly brought to the fore as a laudable attitude and as the kind of disposition expected of any one who claims to be a believer.

John's teaching on material possessions is in keeping with well-known Jewish teaching on almsgiving:

<sup>748</sup> H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 213.

<sup>749</sup> Josephus, as we have noted, also describes John's ministry in ethical terms: "[John] exhorted the Jews to live righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows..." (*Ant.* xviii.5).

<sup>750</sup> R.J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles*, 6. See also pages 25-29.

<sup>751</sup> H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 155.

Is not this the fast that I choose...to share your bread with the hungry...when you see the naked, to cover them...? (Isaiah 58:6, 7);

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honours him (Proverbs 14:31).

John's message to the multitudes, as an expression of the author of Luke-Acts' social concern, is seen, for example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), or in the idealistic description of the life of the Christian community in Acts 2:44-46 and 4:32-37. Indeed, the author has already expressed, through Mary's song in the birth narrative, the hope that John's birth would mark the beginning of an age in which "the hungry will be filled with good things, while the rich are sent away empty" (Luke 1:53), an age that Moxnes defines as an era of "redistribution" of goods.<sup>752</sup> The emergence of John, and the message of his ministry indeed set this age of "redistribution" in motion. The fruits of conversion, says John the Baptist, are best seen in one's concern for the welfare of others. John introduces the idea of an alternative society, the society of the Kingdom of God so avidly awaited by the various sectarians of his time. Where Matthew is concerned about turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), the author of Luke-Acts shows – through the preaching of John the Baptist as well as in the proclamations of Jesus and others – that he is more concerned about sharing material possessions and giving food to the hungry. The repentance and the baptism that goes with it lead to new social relationships and to a heightened sense of responsibility for the welfare of the other. That, for John the Baptist, is the external, visible essence of repentance.

### 13.2.2 Tax Collectors

Tax farming on behalf of the Roman administration was often a lucrative business that, of its nature, was open to all forms of greed and avarice on the part of the tax collectors. Taxation was oppressive, regardless of who was taxed.<sup>753</sup> According to Schürer,<sup>754</sup> who bases himself extensively on the authority of Josephus on the taxation system of the Roman empire, the collection of customs and taxes was leased out for a

<sup>752</sup> H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 154-159.

<sup>753</sup> E. Schürer makes reference to the complaints that the provinces of Syria and Judaea made to the Roman administration in 17 C.E. against the burden of taxation. See *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 373, n.92.

<sup>754</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 374-376.

fixed annual fee to *publicani*, a system in which the Romans appear to have made use of Jewish (and, generally, provincial) authorities. The named tax collectors we encounter in the New Testament are, at least in name, Jewish: Zacchaeus (at Jericho: Luke 19:1-10) and Matthew<sup>755</sup> (in Galilee: Matthew 9:9; 10:3). The complex system of collecting taxes in the Roman empire appears to have had the following general features:

- (a) the collection was annually leased out to the highest bidder in a particular district, and he agreed to pay a certain sum to the government,
- (b) "Whatever the revenue yielded in excess of [the fixed annual] sum was [the tax collector's] gain, but if the revenue fell short of the rental, they had to bear the loss";<sup>756</sup>
- (c) there was plenty of scope for rapacity and arbitrariness on the part of the tax collectors,
- (d) consequently, "The exploitation of such opportunities and the not infrequent overcharges made by these officials caused them, as a class, to be loathed by the people."<sup>757</sup>

John admonishes the tax collectors against greediness: they are to collect no more than is appointed to them: "Collect no more than is appointed you" (Luke 3:13). This gives an indication of the general injustice and corruption that were a ubiquitous feature of the society of John's time. Again in this, as in a number of other texts, the social concern of Luke-Acts emerges. Indeed, there are significant texts in which corruption is tackled head on and rejected outright: scribes are condemned for 'devouring' the houses of the widows (Luke 20:47); a widow finally secures justice for herself that had been long been denied her (Luke 18:1-5);<sup>758</sup> the abuses taking place at the Temple in Jerusalem are of such proportions, and so rampant, that Jesus

<sup>755</sup> Also called Levi in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27.

<sup>756</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 374.

<sup>757</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 376.

<sup>758</sup> It must be noted, though, that the context within which this particular text appears is that of praying without ceasing. However, it is also relevant in the context of social justice, and the widow in the parable had for long been denied this – hence her constant request for it.

refers to the Temple as a “den of robbers” (Luke 19:45-46); the chief priests and those working with them rightly perceived and deduced that they were the ones referred to as the wicked tenants in the parable of the vineyard (Luke 20:1-19).

John’s command to the tax collectors that they should “collect no more than is appointed [them]” is a radical command that has led P. Hollenbach to comment that

For [tax collectors] to heed John’s call for repentance with its accompanying demand would entail a total rejection of their former way of life...For when he demanded that they should not collect funds beyond what they had contracted for, he was striking at the root of a large part of the tax system.<sup>759</sup>

W.R. Farmer comments on the same command of John to the tax collectors and says that

The requirement that tax collectors refrain from collecting more than was appointed to them would have set them at odds with the social and economic structures of which they were a part. It would have resulted in a readjustment on the part of their families. Furthermore, it would have required a complete reorientation of their motivation in accepting the responsibilities of their office. Because, once the prospect of becoming rich has been removed, few would want to continue the onerous duties of collecting unpopular taxes from resentful people. Especially so when the money directly or indirectly supported the (Roman) occupation forces and the concomitant collaborating (Jewish) bureaucracy.<sup>760</sup>

John expects the tax collectors to show their repentance by willing to reject and abandon their well-known unjust practices. Such an abandonment of his practices by a tax collector is indicated in the Third Gospel: When Levi – the tax collector – was confronted by Jesus, “he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Luke 5:28).

In the New Testament, the words “tax collectors and sinners” are used interchangeably due to the deep-seated hatred of tax collectors by the population generally (Mark 2:15-16; Matthew 9:10-11; 11:19; Luke 7:24; 15:1-2; 19:7). In the words of I.H. Marshall, tax collectors were “cordially hated and despised by their fellow-countrymen and, in addition, their jobs made them ritually unclean.”<sup>761</sup> They

<sup>759</sup> P. Hollenbach, “Social Aspects of John the Baptizer’s Preaching Mission in the Context of Palestinian Judaism”, *ANRW* II.19.1 (1979), 871.

<sup>760</sup> W.R. Farmer, “Taxes” in *IDB*, vol. II (:960, n.75).

<sup>761</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 143.

were therefore readily grouped together with those to be excluded from society.<sup>762</sup> Thus, one who refused to listen was to be treated as a “Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). Jesus is presented in Matthew as speaking of “tax collectors and prostitutes” in one breath (Matthew 21:31-32). In Luke, a self-righteous Pharisee classes tax collectors with men who are “extortioners, unjust, adulterers” (Luke 18:11). Tax collectors are thus associated with all that is base in the social fabric. There was clearly no love lost between the tax collectors and the general public.

And yet, according to Luke 3:12-13, it is they, the despised tax collectors, who come to John the Baptist with a very genuine desire to repent and to change – if not their profession, then their means. We have here, yet again, an instance of that Lucan universality that will not permit anyone – no matter how base their station in life and their association in the public’s assessment – to be excluded if they repent and change their ways. It is to be noted, for example, that whereas Matthew introduces John as addressing the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matthew 3:7-12), the author of Luke-Acts has John preaching to an indeterminate crowd.<sup>763</sup> John’s ministry is open to all; salvation is available to all who repent and are baptized. To paraphrase Luke 3:9, redemption is open to any tree that bears fruit that befits repentance. It is to be noted also that, generally, the Lucan assessment of tax collectors is not as harsh as that of the other Evangelists. For example, in a passage common to the Synoptic Gospels, namely that of the calling of Matthew (or Levi) and the subsequent meal that Jesus has with him and with other tax collectors (Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32), where Mark and Matthew describe the presence of “many tax collectors and sinners”, Luke notes simply the presence of “a large crowd of tax collectors *and others*” (our italics). It is not surprising, therefore, that this reviled group is included with the multitudes that come to John for baptism as a sign of their repentance. In fact, according to Luke 7:30, the tax collectors are in a more enviable position in comparison with the Pharisees and lawyers because these had “rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by [John].” Nor is this the only instance in which Luke turns the social and moral tables in favour of the tax

<sup>762</sup> About tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, beggars, the poor and the crippled, and their generally being lumped together by society, see L. Schottroff & W. Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1986, 6-17.

<sup>763</sup> The universal scope of this word is developed by G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 151-152.



collectors. In one of Jesus' parables unique to Luke, it is not the self-righteous and pompous Pharisee who leaves the Temple at rights with God, but the honest, self-effacing and genuinely repentant tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). It is also significant that one member of Jesus' inner circle – the Twelve – is the tax collector Levi, and among Jesus' closest followers was Mary of Magdala, a woman of ill repute who became one of the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

According to Luke-Acts, therefore, the social status of being a tax collector did not, contrary to the common perception, exclude one from salvation. Indeed, the author of Luke-Acts quite consciously presents tax collectors as people who serve as models for discipleship.<sup>764</sup> Jesus, as we see in Matthew 21:31 (and much to the indignation and disgust of his audience), equally saw no problem whatsoever in sinners and prostitutes entering the kingdom of heaven while the chief priests and elders are excluded. Thus has the author of Luke-Acts, in the words of one of his characters, Mary, "scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts...put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:51-52). In Luke-Acts, then, the socially unacceptable are among the first to repent and to receive John's baptism; among the first to "bear fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3:8), and thus among the first to save themselves from the coming wrath of God.<sup>765</sup> Those that society rejects are affirmed and shown as not only leading the way to salvation, but also as serving as examples for others.<sup>766</sup>

Jesus later takes up this motif and develops it. In the parable of the great banquet, for example, those who have a claim to being invited are eventually excluded, while those previously left outside are let in (Luke 14:15-24). Similarly in the narrative on John's preaching, those who have a claim on Abraham as their father (and therefore think they will automatically be saved on this account) are not the ones who will be saved. Instead, the 'non-Abrahamic' people or those considered to have excluded themselves from the chosen people by their choice of professions (e.g. the tax collectors and the soldiers) are the ones who avail themselves of the opportunity to be

<sup>764</sup> R.J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 2-5.

<sup>765</sup> There are several passages in Luke-Acts that indicate the author understood repentance as providing the means of escape from divine judgment and divine wrath, for example Luke 10:13-14; 11:32; 13:1-5; 16:27-30; Acts 8:22-24; 17:30-31.

<sup>766</sup> R.J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 2-5; 29-31.

saved by undergoing John's baptism of repentance. God's salvation knows no social or ethnic boundaries, and does not remain culturally bound to the people of Israel alone.

### 13.2.3 *The Soldiers*

Soldiers are the third group of people specifically identified as coming to John for baptism and, at their specific request, receive advice from him: "Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And [John] said to them, 'Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.'" (Luke 3:14).

The military organization of the Roman Empire has been extensively discussed in various historical (e.g. Schürer) and some ancient sources (e.g. Josephus). While it is not within the scope of the current study to discuss this subject at any length,<sup>767</sup> suffice it to note that what emerges from available historical sources generally is that the Roman Empire had a formidable, efficient, and well-organized military machine that enabled it to keep under order and in firm control its far-flung dominions and their multi-cultural inhabitants. It has also been noted that the Roman military was among its most efficient cultural missionaries who helped diffuse Roman culture and religions throughout the regions of the Empire.<sup>768</sup> By the same token, it was the military that helped introduce a number of eastern religions into Rome itself,<sup>769</sup> especially as the military became more provincial.

Of direct relevance to us is the mention of the soldiers among the crowds that came to be baptized and advised by John the Baptist in Luke 3:14.<sup>770</sup> This raises various questions. We have already noted in passing that the soldiers referred to in John's ministry were probably not all of them Jewish. Admittedly, scholars are divided on the question whether Jews served in the Roman military or not. On the other hand there seems to be an indication that in the Roman Empire the Jews were exempted

<sup>767</sup> For a very brief but helpful description of the Roman military and its various orders see G.L. Thompson, "Roman Military" in C.A. Evans & S.E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of the New Testament Background*, 991-995. See also E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, 46-52.

<sup>768</sup> E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 46-52.

<sup>769</sup> E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 262-264.

<sup>770</sup> Various references to the military are made in Luke-Acts, and generally in positive terms. See, for example in Luke 7:1-10; 23:44-47; Acts 10:1-48; 21:31-38; 22:22-29; 23:10, 17-32; 27:1-6, 42-44; 28:16.

from military service. This, according to Schürer, was “to avoid conflict with their observation of Jewish festivals and the sabbath regulation”.<sup>771</sup> This, however, does not make the identity of the soldiers in Luke 3:14 any clearer. If they were not Jews, it is also likely that they were not Roman either, for J.A. Fitzmyer reminds us that “there were no legions stationed in Palestine in this time, nor auxiliaries from other provinces”.<sup>772</sup> On the other hand, there are also scholars who do not hold this view. I.H. Marshall, for example, maintains that “Jewish auxiliaries [were] used in Judea for police duties”.<sup>773</sup> According to G.L. Thompson, Jewish auxiliaries also formed a part of the Roman military units whenever they were needed.<sup>774</sup> In any case, it is probable that some Jews were among Herod’s soldiers and mercenaries.

It would appear then that the soldiers of Luke 3:14 were most likely from Herod’s domain in Perea,<sup>775</sup> and this would explain Herod’s political fears in Josephus’ narrative about John the Baptist. John’s magnetic influence over the multitudes extended to Herod’s military establishment. Herod thus had legitimate grounds to fear the growing rapprochement between John and the soldiers. If John had been so brave as to castigate the ruler (Luke 3:19-20), might he indeed not also eventually negatively influence the soldiers who would also be led to condemn and turn against their master? Being the astute politician and strategist that he was, Herod would not have failed to grasp the implications of the rapport that was now apparently developing between his detractor and his soldiers.

It is, in any event, of some interest that military personnel that was probably non-Jewish should be drawn to what was essentially a Jewish religious movement led by a leader espousing a strong Jewish eschatological theology. Were these soldiers to be considered perhaps among the God-fearers – namely Gentiles who respected the Jewish religion and, to some extent, associated themselves with it, and who, then, were most likely present in the audiences addressed by Paul on his missionary journeys to some of the Roman garrison towns that he and his companions visited?

<sup>771</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 363. See also Josephus, *Ant.* xiii.8.

<sup>772</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 470.

<sup>773</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 143.

<sup>774</sup> See his “Roman Military” in C.A. Evans & S.E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of the New Testament Background*, 994.

<sup>775</sup> See I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 143; F. Méndez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke*, London, T&T Clark, 2004, 83; C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, 241.

Or, as has been noted, would they have been among the many imperial soldiers who were generally attracted to eastern religions (Mithras, Isis, Judaism, etc.) and helped to introduce them to Rome? And yet, Judaism as such was in no way new to Rome. In fact, it had already become a *religio licita* there. Jewish Diaspora communities were usually cohesively organized around synagogue groupings. There was a synagogue in every locality inhabited by Jews. In larger cities such as Antioch and Rome there were several synagogues. The narrative of Acts speaks of synagogues also in Damascus, Cyprus, Iconium, Thessalonica, Beroea, Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 9:2, 20; 13:5; 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:4ff, 26; 19:8). Paul used Jewish synagogues as his first base of operations because the synagogues were an established structure in many cities of the Roman Empire, and not least in Rome itself, which is said to have had eleven resident Jewish communities.<sup>776</sup>

In a period that saw great shifts and movements of populations in response to the new opportunities brought about by the 'higher' Hellenistic culture throughout the Roman Empire, the Jewish dispersion also expanded. Large numbers of Jews settled in the new city of Alexandria, while Syria became yet another numerically significant Jewish Diaspora, especially the trading metropolis of Antioch. The extent of Jewish dispersion by the first century C.E. is best described by Strabo, a Hellenistic geographer of the time (i.e. around 25 C.E.) when he says it was "not easy to find a place in the inhabited world which this tribe [the Jews] has not penetrated and which has not been occupied by it".<sup>777</sup> It is very likely that throughout this period, and in the time of John the Baptist, the total Jewish population outside Palestine was considerably larger than that in the homeland.<sup>778</sup> While many Jews had anyhow not returned from the Babylonian exile when Cyrus of Persia gave them the opportunity to do so in 539 B.C.E., it appears that the social and economic opportunities that the Hellenistic culture and the *Pax Romana* throughout the Roman Empire under Augustus afforded were such that there was a big movement of people away from Palestine to other regions of the empire. When the Jewish population of a city grew very large as in Alexandria, Antioch and Rome this sometimes caused friction with other sections of the population that at times resulted in discrimination,

<sup>776</sup> On Roman Judaism and its internal organization see R. Penna's "Judaism (Rome)", in the *ABD*, volume 3, 1073-1076. Cf. Also F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 146.

<sup>777</sup> As quoted by S. Freyne, *The World of the New Testament*, 69.

<sup>778</sup> See "Judaism" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 10, 1974: "During the Hellenistic-Roman period the chief centres of Jewish population outside Palestine were in Syria, Asia Minor, Babylonia, and Egypt, each of which is estimated to have had at least 1,000,000 Jews", (:312).

oppression, and revolt, as indeed was the case in these cities several times during the Hellenistic and Roman period.<sup>779</sup>

So, what had the soldiers to do with John the Baptist? It is possible to accept that they had gone to John's sessions for the purposes of maintaining order should this be necessary, in view of the big crowds that attended John's sessions, as well as in view of the habitual volatility of Jews when assembled together in large numbers. Some scholars suggest that the soldiers were, in fact, "police assigned to protect tax collectors"<sup>780</sup> – an occupation that exposed them to the same temptations and corruption as the tax collectors whom they were meant to protect.

Josephus, in his comment that the crowds were so taken with John that they looked as though they might have done anything he commanded,<sup>781</sup> gives some indication that security fears are certainly not to be discounted on the part of the Herod Antipas. The presence of a deterrent contingent among John's multitudes would have been a wise preventive measure on the part of the wary and astute politician that Herod was.

It appears that, yet, again, the appearance of the soldiers among those coming to John for baptism is a means of expressing the universal and inclusive outlook of the author of Luke-Acts. Whether foreign or local, the soldiers would have been viewed with hatred by the native population for various reasons. Since before the Maccabean revolt, there was generally little love lost between the occupying Romans (or their puppet Jewish governments such as Herod's administration clearly was) and the generality of the people. As the books of the Maccabees make clear, only the Jewish aristocracy stood to gain from collaborating with the occupying or local forces that represented the awesome might of Rome (and of Greece before that). The fact that "Besides that of Caesarea, small [Roman] garrisons were stationed in other cities and towns of Palestine",<sup>782</sup> and also the fact that there was a garrison permanently stationed in the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem (Acts 21:31; John 18:12) would not

<sup>779</sup> See C. Osiek, *What Are They Saying About The Social Setting Of The New Testament?*, 21.

<sup>780</sup> J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 150. See also F. Méndez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke*, 84; A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, 92.

<sup>781</sup> *Ant.* xviii.

<sup>782</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 365.



have sat well with the Jewish people at all. Schürer,<sup>783</sup> following Josephus,<sup>784</sup> also notes that there was a fortified Roman garrison at Machaerus. This was east of the Jordan, as noted before, in the region of Peraea – namely in the region, generally speaking, of John the Baptist's activity. The soldiers based at Machaerus could, conceivably, be some of (or among) those who came to John with their question in Luke 3:14. Soldiers were a ubiquitous and permanent reminder of occupation and loss of national status and, to some extent, loss of religious freedom as Rome was not averse to appointing or supporting candidates for the High Priesthood and imposing them on Jerusalem when the occasion seemed to them to require such intervention. The soldier was thus often the first symbol or representative of a deeply hated system that the average Jew was likely to meet.

Yet we meet John baptizing the soldiers, converting them, and entertaining their questions and giving them ethical advice about their professional conduct. This strikes a cord that is by now familiar in Luke-Acts: no one is excluded from salvation and perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the portrayal of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts is that John is, in fact, shown to be the first person to make a breakthrough to the Gentiles. Certainly the reference to John's mixed audience (whethery they be the anonymous "multitudes" of Luke 3:7-11, or the tax collectors of Luke 3:12-13, or the soldiers of Luke 3:14) appears to strengthen our hypothesis that John prepares in a direct way for the eventual inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God. A lot has been made of Peter's conversion of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10 and 11 as representing the first outreach of the gospel to the Gentile world. Equally, a lot has been made of Paul's zealous missionary outreach to the Gentiles in Acts; yet right here in Luke 3:14 John the Baptist is actually the first to concretely extend the hand of welcome to both Jews *and* non-Jews. Nor do we hear that there is any adverse reaction from the rest of the Jewish multitude that is present and witnessing the entire spectacle. Indeed, it would appear that John the Baptist made a better job of universalizing the gospel by reaching out to the Gentiles than did either Peter or Paul. Nowhere, for example, do we read of John the Baptist's method or proclamation leading to the kinds of polemical and ethnic tensions such as those that dogged Peter

<sup>783</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. I, 365.

<sup>784</sup> *War* ii.18.

and Paul (and, especially, the latter), that resulted in the kinds of episodes recorded in Acts 11, Acts 15, and Galatians 2 among others.

### 13.2.4 *Herod Antipas*

Herod Antipas is the only secondary character that both John and Jesus interact with, and in both instances the circumstances are of grave, and eventually fatal significance for both. In Luke 9:7-9 we hear, quite in passing, that it was Herod who killed John, while in Luke 23:6-12 Herod plays a part in the trial of Jesus before Jesus is ultimately killed with the consent of Pilate (Luke 23:24).

In addition to the groups of people addressed by John the Baptist during his ministry was this one particular individual: Herod Antipas. We do not have a report of a direct encounter between John and Herod as we have between John and the multitudes, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. What we do have, instead, is a reference, made by Herod, to the fatal consequences (for John) of the encounter between them: "Herod said, 'John I beheaded'" (Luke 9:9). We have to go back to Luke 3:19-20 to understand the motive behind Herod's killing of John:

But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by [John] for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison.

John's strong condemnation of the morals of his time had hit home at Herod. We noted earlier Josephus' account<sup>785</sup> of what he believes were the reasons behind Herod's killing of John: basically, reasons of political security. Herod feared John's tremendous influence over the people. John, according to Herod's probable interpretation of events, was not beyond fomenting a popular uprising. If, as Luke 3:14 states, even soldiers had begun to be drawn to John's message and felt the need for repentance and a possible change in lifestyle, then Herod indeed had great reason to fear: not merely a popular uprising (as if that would not be bad enough), but a military rebellion as well since some of his own soldiers from Machaerus (see the supposition above) were perhaps among John's converts. The socio-political implications of John's preaching must have appeared particularly disturbing for Herod and may have driven him into a panic: tax collectors were being converted, (=

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<sup>785</sup> *Ant.* xviii.

possible negative effects on the economy); multitudes were being given a new social teaching and specifically the issue of poverty was being raised: no food, no clothing (= possible social unrest); now the soldiers were also being drawn into John's web and asking questions of relative strategic importance (= a possible military rebellion or a threat to security). John challenged the very foundations of the social and economic order of Herod's administration. Then, of course, there was the direct attack on his own person and the disreputable affairs of his family (= possible loss of face and respect, as well as the erosion of the loyalty of his subjects and other associates). One course of action must have been clear to Herod: John the Baptist was a grave liability and had to be got rid of.

As an aside, we may note that, in a fashion, this way of dealing with royalty's thorns in the flesh was not altogether dissimilar to the method that, over a millennium later, King Henry II of England, exasperated by, and annoyed at the seemingly excessive piety and incorruptible nature of his Chancellor and Primate, Thomas à Beckett (1118-1170), led to his outburst: "Who'll rid me of this meddling priest?", whereupon Thomas was promptly dispatched.<sup>786</sup>

According to Josephus' assessment in *Antiquities* xviii:116-119, Herod certainly "miscalculated to ill effect his audience" by his killing of John the Baptist.

However, back to John the Baptist and Herod. The killing of John brought no relief to Herod: "Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done [by Jesus], and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead..." (Luke 9:8)

Jesus later stepped into John's shoes – but in Galilee – and he too could not remain for long unnoticed by Herod who "sought to see him" (Luke 9:9). Herod apparently intended to kill Jesus as well, according to the warning some Pharisees gave to Jesus (Luke 13:31).

<sup>786</sup> See M. Holtby, "St Thomas: Thomas a Beckett" in E.O. Parrott (ed.), *How to Become Absurdly Well-Informed About the Famous and Infamous*, London, Penguin Books, 1987, 33-34.

In condemning Herod, John is shown as exercising a prophetic role. He is simply doing what many of his prophetic predecessors had done: he is acting like Moses confronting the powerful Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1-5), or the prophet Nathan taking King David to task over the Bathsheba affair (2 Samuel 12:1-15), or Elijah censuring Ahab and Jezebel over their murder of Naboth in order to acquire his vineyard (2 Kings 21:17-29). Also, the way that the evil actions of Herod are described echoes the summative formula used elsewhere in the scriptures to evaluate the lives of some evil rulers. This can be seen, for example, when a comparison is made between the condemnation of Ahab and Herod. Ahab is dismissively described in 1 Kings 16:30 as he who "did evil in the sight of the Lord", and in 1 Kings 21:25 as he "who sold himself to do evil". In a similar fashion, Herod's life is briefly summed up in Luke 3:19 in the phrase "all the evil which Herod did". Herod is thus characterized as the stereotypical wicked ruler who is confronted by the prophet. Herod's persecution and imprisonment of John the Baptist is fully in keeping with the image of the righteous Old Testament prophet who suffers at the hands of a wicked ruler.

The tone and message of the preaching of John the Baptist makes one fundamental point clear: the Good News is for all who repent, are baptized, and bear "fruits" that are a visible expression of their repentance. This is the task given to John even before he was born – making "ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17), a people representative of humanity, drawn from all sectors of society (multitudes, tax collectors, soldiers, even leaders like Herod – if they repent – Luke 3:10-14, 19). These are the people who will escape "the wrath to come", (Luke 3:7) the people (or "trees") that bear good fruit and will therefore not be cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9). In conclusion, we quote G.D. Nave:

The author [of Luke-Acts], by way of the dialogical scheme of Luke 3:10-14, depicts John the Baptist not as a preacher of gloom and doom but as a preacher of hope and encouragement, even to the most despised segments of the population at that time. Part of the hope and encouragement that John brings is that repentance, which delivers people from the wrath to come, is available to all people and that repentance requires the just, merciful and equitable treatment of all people by all people, enabling diverse individuals to receive the salvation of God and to live together as a community of God's people.<sup>787</sup>

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<sup>787</sup> G.D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 159.

## 14. ABRAHAM'S EXTENDED FAMILY

### 14.1 *Introduction*

In Luke 3:8 John the Baptist says to the Jews in his audience: "Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'". In the following verse, John drives the point further home: "for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." It is therefore possible both to lose the special status as children of Abraham, and to acquire it, and those who pride themselves in having it are the ones most likely to lose it. This clarifies John's perspective on Abrahamic descent: it is broad, all inclusive, for qualification is no longer based on blood, but on bearing the fruits of repentance. Within the overall Lucan theology, John's re-interpretation of this foundational tenet of Judaism is very significant, for John is shown, in fact, as opening the way for the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. Subsequently the great missionaries of Acts will be engaged in a wide-ranging ministry to the Gentiles, a ministry whose seeds can be said to have been sown by John the Baptist. John redefines the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, thereby becoming a pioneer in the universalism that is so prominent in Luke-Acts.

### 14.2 *Jews and Romans*

The strong social emphasis in John's message, and the general pre-occupation of the author of Luke-Acts with social issues (for example, concern for the poor, the sick, and the marginalized) may help us in assembling a composite of the social environment within which it may perhaps be possible to locate the readers of Luke-Acts. That it was an environment of social deprivation and neglect, a period of injustice against the poor and widows, a period of a disproportionate balance between the rich, the poor, and the women – all this is deducible from the way in which Luke presents Jesus, Peter, Paul and other characters in the story as building bridges across the various levels of the social and economic divide. The idealized unity and communal life of the Christian community in Acts 2:43-47 and Acts 4:32-35 also serves as an ideal of social communism that the Christians of the author's community are to emulate. It is thus not to be wondered at that the classes of people at the peripheries of society are also the same ones shown to be clustered around John the Baptist, for it is inherent in the good news to go beyond social boundaries and class



status. The marginalized are the ones who go through a genuine repentance and accept to go through with the ritual of baptism as a clear sign and public expression of this metanoia. This same concern for the marginalized becomes a particular aspect of Lucan theology throughout Luke-Acts.

Even though the precise location of Luke's community may be difficult to determine, apart from the assumption that it was probably predominantly Gentile Christian with a strong Jewish Christian minority, there may however be other helpful indications in the special material unique to the Third Gospel, namely material that is found neither in Mark nor in 'Q.; and in this regard Luke 3:10-14 may be a particularly apposite text for locating the social levels of Luke's audience. John the Baptist is presented as addressing ethical exhortations to a crowd largely made up of Jews, in addition to which there are also tax collectors loyal to the financial structures and economic wellbeing of the Roman Empire and its puppet governments, and the soldiers who are the guardians of imperial law and order. For Luke's community, which still saw the mission and proclamation of the good news in prophetic terms such as those that John the Baptist used (for example social concern for others, upholding the moral codes of the nation, bearing fruits that befit repentance), the question of relations between Jews and Gentiles was still of some fundamental importance. Therefore the reference by John the Baptist to God raising up children for Abraham "from these stones" which, even if in theory only, clearly opened the way for Gentiles to be counted in as well – would have resonated well with the non-Jewish members of Luke's community. At the same time, however, Luke generally displays a positive attitude towards those who help to administer and defend the Roman Empire.<sup>788</sup> The reference to tax collectors and soldiers in a favourable light would thus have been well-received by those members of the community who, willingly or unwillingly, found themselves drawing into supporting and being involved in maintaining the economic or political structures of an otherwise detested Roman Empire and its machinery of state.

Through examples such as those above, it is evident that the author of Luke-Acts strives to keep, and largely succeeds in maintaining in balance the twin perspectives of Israel and Rome for his readers. In Luke-Acts, the turning to the Gentiles (or their

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<sup>788</sup> See, for example, at Luke 7:1-10; 23:13-25; 23:44-47; Acts 10:1-48; 25:1-26:32, and similar texts.

inclusion in the divine plan of salvation) does not, as we shall see shortly, mean the repudiation of the Jews. They are not rejected or dispossessed of their heritage. Neither, however, are the formidable imperial might nor the awesome authority of Rome existential realities and contexts to be taken lightly. Indeed, Rome and its imperial structures are clearly respected in Luke-Acts, if not actually admired. Thus, for example, Luke treats named Romans very favourably; indeed so favourably that some scholars have interpreted his quasi-servile attitude towards the Empire as intended to curry favour with the imperial authorities on behalf of the Empire's newest and youngest religion (namely, Christianity). In the Passion narrative, for example, Pontius Pilate attests to Jesus' innocence and makes efforts to free him (Luke 23:1-5). In Acts, the Roman centurion Cornelius is the first Gentile to convert to Christianity (Acts 10:1-11:18). This is similar to another very favourable portrait of a centurion in the Third Gospel (Luke 7:1-10) who, out of love for the Jewish people and their religion, built their synagogue for them. In this latter case, the author of Luke-Acts notes specifically the virtues most sought after in an official of the Roman Empire, namely friendship, respect for authority, and piety ("not even in Israel have I found such faith", Jesus says of the centurion in Luke 7:9). After witnessing Paul's cursing of Elymas the magician, the proconsul of Paphos in Cyprus – Sergius Paulus – becomes a believer (Acts 13:6-12). In the narrative of Acts, Roman citizenship is held in such high esteem that the mere mention of it provokes anxiety among those about to infringe its rights (Acts 16:35-40; 22:22-29). There is also a great concern for Roman law in Acts: Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, refuses to adjudicate on the Jewish attacks on Paul on the basis of Roman law. He says, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to bear with you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things" (Acts 18:15).<sup>789</sup> The Roman tribune, Claudius Lysias, is responsible for rescuing Paul from Jewish mobs on more than one occasion (Acts 21:27-36; 23:9-10, 12-22, 27). Roman law once again comes to Paul's aid when he appeals to Caesar through Porcius Festus (Acts 25:11-12).

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<sup>789</sup> See also Acts 19:40.

It could thus be that Bo Reicke has accurately assessed the kind of message that the author of Luke-Acts is trying to impart to his audience. According to Bo Reicke, Luke, among other things, seems to be saying to his audience living under the authority of Rome that

The activity of Christians and the tenets of their religion create no difficulty for a sensible, reasonable system of government. Only an irrational government or people, led by religious prejudice and/or hatred, could find fault with Christianity. In any nation ruled by reason, Christians make good citizens.<sup>790</sup> In other words, the Roman administrators need have no fear of Christianity having a subversive influence in the Empire.<sup>791</sup>

If Luke's message is in this way addressed to the Romans, it is equally addressed to his audience: they have nothing to fear from the well-ordered structures of the Roman government. This would offer a degree of comfort to his audience, particularly if they had got word of Domitian's treatment of the adherents of Christianity and Judaism (that is to say, non-Roman religions) in Rome itself. There, Judaism and Christianity could be (and were), due to their characteristic monotheism, easily open to the accusation of *impietas* (i.e., disavowal of the Roman majesty and the imperial cult) as well as atheism, which, in the Roman Empire under Domitian (81-96 C.E.), was not tolerated as it was seen as rejection of the state gods of Rome. If the emperor could make short work of his own closest relatives (Flavius Clemens and his wife Flavia Domitilla)<sup>792</sup>, and close officials of the State (for example Epaphroditus, the Secretary of State)<sup>793</sup> under the accusation of atheism, it was clear that Domitian would not brook any intransigence on the part of monotheistic Jews and Christians within the Empire. Fear of persecution by imperial agents whose reach was notoriously long was thus real for Luke's Christian community.

Luke's concern is with social reconstruction, and he strives to come to terms with the political, cultural, and social context of his audience. Hence his particular attention to the people relegated to the periphery of society, or cast out of it altogether. His portrayal of John the Baptist ministering to the crowds, the tax collectors, and the

<sup>790</sup> R.F. O'Toole, "Luke's Position on Politics and Society in Luke-Acts", in R.J. Cassidy & P.J. Scharper (eds.), *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*, 8.

<sup>791</sup> See B. Reicke, *The New Testament Era*, 279-317.

<sup>792</sup> Flavius Clemens was Domitian's cousin as well as a co-consul, while Flavia Domitilla was Domitian's niece. See B. Reicke, *The New Testament Era*, 280.

<sup>793</sup> B. Reicke, *The New Testament Era*, 281.

soldiers, and exhorting them all to social responsibility communicates to his audience a clear message of social concern, which he idealizes in the quasi-utopian picture of life among believers in Acts 2:44-47:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

### 14.3 *A New Social and Religious Ethos*

The reference in John's warning in Luke 3:8 to having "Abraham as our father", while intended for all in the audience, is obviously directed to the Jews in a particularly relevant way. They, of all the people present, would have grasped the pointed significance of John's condemnation of their false sense of security, and they would have felt directly challenged by John's statement. However, does the fact that John nullifies the false sense of security of those who pride themselves of the invulnerability of their position on the basis that they have Abraham as their father mean that John is repudiating his own people and dispossessing them of their ancestral and covenantal heritage?<sup>794</sup> The same question arises in relation to Paul's and Barnabas' declaration in Acts 13:46: "Since you [Jewish people] thrust [God's word] from you...behold, we turn to the Gentiles." What does all this actually mean for the Jewish people in terms of God's salvific plan, and what light does the author of Luke-Acts shed on this question?

The issue regarding how the author of Luke-Acts understands the position of the Jews and their relationship to the Gentiles in the light of the new dispensation (namely, the salvation of *all* humanity) is of particular interest, especially as it may help us

<sup>794</sup> It will soon be evident that our own interpretation of this statement by John differs somewhat from that of O. Betz "Was John the Baptist an Essene?", in H. Shanks (ed.), *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 211, and J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, 29. Betz interprets Luke 3:8 as meaning that God would raise a living Temple of people that would replace the Temple of stones. Meier, on the other hand, interprets the same verse as meaning that God is all powerful, and as such God can create living human beings from inanimate matter ("stones"). These interpretations fail to grasp the significance of what is happening not only in the narrative context of Luke 3:8, but in the broader context of Luke-Acts in general as regards the overall person and mission of John the Baptist. John is simply saying that no longer have the Jewish people a unique claim on God. "These stones" refers to all of the created order: God is God of all and over all creation. But in the particular context of Luke 3:7-14, John is saying God is no longer God of Israel only, but God of all people. The emphasis is thus not on the "stones" (*pace* Meier), or on what is made of stone (i.e., in the sense of the Temple built of stone – *pace* Betz), but on John's hearers.

understand the role that the author of Luke-Acts has assigned to John the Baptist in relation to this particular question. A close study of Acts 13:44-47 gives a broader perspective from which to understand John's warning in Luke 3:8: "do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham".

What makes Acts 13:44-47 significant for our purposes is that it is associated with John the Baptist in its broader narrative context. Acts 13:44-47 is set in Antioch of Pisidia, on the first leg of Paul's recently commissioned missionary journeys. In his speech in the synagogue, Paul highlights John's preparatory role in Israel:

Before [Jesus'] coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie'. (Acts 13:24-25).

As the narrative develops, we come to verse 46 ("It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles") which is parallel to Luke 3:8 ("Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham"). Both verses refer to the place of the Jews in relation to the Gentiles in the redemption already under way; both are set in a context of a call to repentance and to participation in the divine plan that all should be saved. As some among the Jewish people excluded themselves from salvation by refusing John's baptism in Luke 3:8<sup>795</sup> (that is to say, by refusing to repent), so too did they exclude themselves by rejecting Paul's and Barnabas' proclamation about Jesus in Acts 13:46.

#### ***14.4 Luke 3:7-9 and Acts 13:44-47***

The significance of Luke 3:7-9 and Acts 13:44-47 calls for a closer look in view of the question raised above: if God can so easily raise up other children to Abraham, where in fact does John the Baptist place the present children of Abraham? In other words, where does John place Judaism vis-à-vis the judgment to come? A look at Acts 13:44-47 may help in creating a broader context within which to assess not only John's perception of Judaism but, in fact, Luke's own position in general with regard to what we may call, for want of a better phrase, the 'Jewish question'. It is from

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<sup>795</sup> See also at Luke 7:30.



especially the perception of the author of Luke-Acts on this issue that the reader is able to create a canvas large enough to sketch the background of, for example, such scenes as at Acts 15 (or Galatians 2 and, to a very large extent, Paul's general pastoral approach to questions of Jewish ethnicity in dialogue or at loggerheads with Gentile Christianity).

The texts of Luke 3:7-9 and Acts 13:44-47 read as follows:

LUKE 3:7-9	ACTS 13:44-47
<p>[John] said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."</p>	<p>The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'"</p>

#### 14.4.1 *From Jews to Gentiles*

These texts have raised some questions as to the perception that the author of Luke-Acts has of the Jewish people in general. On the one hand, Luke presents John the Baptist as clearly indicating that the days when the Jews thought of themselves as Abraham's children were now over (Luke 3:8-9). On the other hand, Luke also has Paul and Barnabas, as it were, giving up on the Jews: "Since you thrust [the word of God] from you...behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Scholars have drawn different conclusions. Some have interpreted Acts 13:46 as meaning that the door to salvation is now closed to the Jews, and that their rejection is complete,<sup>796</sup> while those representing the extreme view of this position see both the Gospel and Acts as

<sup>796</sup> E. Haenchen, "The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity", in L. Keck & J.L. Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 45, for example, thinks that Luke has "written the Jews off". This view is shared by other scholars (e.g. J. Gnilka, J.T. Sanders, J. Tyson, S.G. Wilson, etc.) who all agree that, for Luke, the mission to Israel is over. For a synopsis of the positions of various authors regarding the perceived rejection of the Jews, see M.A. Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, 67-72; 130, n.46.

basically anti-Jewish.<sup>797</sup> The promises of salvation originally made to the Jews, so argue those who hold this view, have been taken away from them, and those promises have now become the patrimony of the Gentiles.

Some other writers seem, however, to have understood Luke's perception of the Jews rather along the lines of our own convictions on the subject. Some of these authors have not only *not* seen any rejection of the Jews, but in fact a strengthening of Judaism by the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation.<sup>798</sup> A closer look at Luke's usage of the term "the Jews" (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) will show that, generally throughout Luke-Acts, the term is not used inclusively, but that it is used only for those of the Jewish people (mostly their leaders) who reject the gospel. The term "the Jews" is thus used in a negative sense mostly in contexts of polemic or misunderstanding between a section of the Jewish community and the evangelizers in Acts. The fact that both Acts 13:46 and Luke 3:8 are not to be interpreted as a rejection of the Jews can be argued on two fronts. Firstly, we have the undeniable fact that Paul and his companions continue to include the Jews in God's plan of salvation even *after* the declaration made in Acts 13:46, in just the same way that after the warning and threatening of the Jews in Luke 3:8-9, John proceeds to baptize them. Secondly, Paul's oft-repeated description of himself in Acts, in which he stresses his own Jewishness, has to be taken into consideration and granted its due weight in the argument for the non-rejection of the Jews both in Acts 13:46 and in Luke 3:8. R.E. Brown suggests that, in any case, the whole question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Luke-Acts must be considered from the perspective of the geographic

<sup>797</sup> See J.T. Sanders (*The Jews in Luke-Acts*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1987, 317), where he says, "In Luke's opinion, the world will be much better off when 'the Jews' get what they deserve and the world is rid of them." Sanders bases his controversial argument on a number of blanket statements of condemnation of 'the Jews' scattered throughout Luke-Acts, such as in Luke 7:9; 11:29-32; Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 4:10-12; 7:51-53; 13:46; 18:6; 28:25-28. According to Sanders, Luke includes even Jewish Christians in his anti-Semitism: "In Luke's opinion, there is little difference between Jewish Christians and other Jews. While the former have 'believed', it is true, they have not done so in true contrition and repentance, but seek rather in their belief, to 'justify themselves' on the basis of their 'Moses'. When they, then, seek to foist 'Moses' upon the Gentile church, they show that they are cut from the same cloth as are their non-Christian kin, who also oppose the notion that the gospel was destined from the beginning for Gentiles". On this basis, according to Sanders, Luke "comes to the opinion that all Jews are equally, in principle at least, perverse; and he turns his attack on all together, without distinction" (:316-317).

<sup>798</sup> See L.T. Johnson, (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 268), who maintains that "the inclusion of the Gentiles does not mean the replacement of 'Israel' but its expansion". Other scholars see the Gentile mission as supplementing the mission to Israel (R. Brawley, D. Tiede, R. Tannehill), or as completing the mission to Israel (J. Jervell). See M.A. Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, 69-71.

interest visible in Luke's work, particularly in the infancy narrative and in Acts. According to Brown, Luke "composed Acts to show how both geographically and theologically the focus of Christianity passed from Jerusalem of the Jews to Rome of the Gentiles".<sup>799</sup> In other words, for Luke the shift from the Jews to the Gentiles is to be interpreted rather as a development, a growth in stages, than a caesura. Thus Christianity, in Luke's perception, is not a schismatic offshoot from Judaism,<sup>800</sup> but a positive growth, expansion and possibly even a perpetuation of Judaism. The theological and dogmatic severance between Christianity and Judaism was, in this sense, a creation of later interpreters of the Jesus event. This, from our reading of Luke's writings and from our interpretation of his geographical interest, is an important starting point for a discussion which seeks to ascertain the point at which an alienated (and alienating) perception of Judaism encounters a triumphant Christianity.

#### 14.4.2 *The Jews in Luke-Acts*

Before Stephen's martyrdom the word "Jews" or "the Jews" is used in a neutral sense to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles generally. Thus for example at Luke 23:3, 37, 38, where the expression occurs in the phrase "king of the Jews" in the passion narrative; or at Luke 7:3 (the centurion sends "Jewish elders" to Jesus). In the other three occurrences (Acts 2:5, 10, 14) Luke emphasizes that the first sermons were addressed to Jews native to Jerusalem as well as from elsewhere. The term "Jews" or "the Jews" is also used merely as a geographical designation, for example at Luke 23:50 ("there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea").

After Stephen's martyrdom, however, even though the use to distinguish Jews from Gentiles still occurs (e.g. at Acts 14:1: "a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks"), as does the geographical use (e.g. at Acts 10:39: "in the country of the Jews"), the term "the Jews" is henceforth used *in malam partem*<sup>801</sup> with great frequency.<sup>802</sup>

<sup>799</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 237.

<sup>800</sup> See also R.E. Brown's assertion that "Luke's stress that Christianity was not just a sect of the Jews but the true Way of worshipping the God of the patriarchs (Acts 24:14) may be further explicable as an attempt to identify the Christian in the Roman world, e.g., they were not one of those Jewish sects who had caused the recent revolt in Palestine, but rather a peaceful religious group with ancient roots" (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 237, n5).

<sup>801</sup> Cf. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 145, n.2).

<sup>802</sup> The word (οἱ) Ἰουδαῖοι occurs almost seventy times in Acts. It occurs in a neutral sense, often meaning the Jews as a nation distinct from others, but more frequently it occurs in an adversarial sense, where the context deals with the persecution of Christians or with opposition to Paul. See at Acts 9:22-

Right away, the first occurrence of the term after Stephen's martyrdom is of this type. In Acts 9:22 Paul "confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus", and in verse 23 "the Jews plotted to kill him". This usage of the term "the Jews" continues throughout Acts. In Acts 12:3, Herod's persecution of the Christians is said to have "pleased the Jews", while Peter is grateful that he has been rescued "from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting" (Acts 12:11). In Paul's mission the opposition he meets from "the Jews" turns up in different ways. They contradict and revile him (Acts 13:45); they oppose him and revile him (Acts 18:6); they make a united attack upon him (Acts 18:12); they make a plot to kill him (Acts 23:12), and they complain to the Roman governor against him (Acts 25:24). These and similar references to "the Jews" support the perception that, beginning with Acts 9:22, "the Jews" are the sworn enemies of the new movement.<sup>803</sup>

It is to be noted, however, that Luke does not use the pejorative sense of "the Jews" as a blanket designation for the Jewish people as a national or ethnic collective. A look at the usage of the term as outlined above reveals that it is used pejoratively only in instances of conflict between the agents of the mission to the Gentiles and the leadership of the Jewish population in any given city.<sup>804</sup> The ordinary Jewish people are shown not only to look favourably on the young Christian community (Acts 2:47) but also to convert in great numbers<sup>805</sup> in response to the apostles' proclamation.<sup>806</sup> Luke notes the progressive growth of the Christian community (originally made up of only Jews) in Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7, and he makes it clear that the increments are in the thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Even at the time that Paul was having his troubles with "the Jews" there was no shortage of Jews that did convert, as can be seen from the boast in Acts 21:20: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed".

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23; 12:3, 11; 13:6, 45, 50; 14:2, 4-5, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12, 14, 28; 19:13-14, 33-34; 20:3, 19; 21:11, 27; 22:30; 23:12, 20, 27; 24:9, 18, 27; 25:2, 7-10, 15, 24; 26:2-3, 7, 21; 28:19.

<sup>803</sup> See J.T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts*, 71-72.

<sup>804</sup> We should note, however, that even among the Jewish leadership not all are shown as being opposed to the new faith. In Acts 5:34-39 it is Gamaliel, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish council, who persuades his colleagues in the Sanhedrin not to hinder the nascent Christian movement since, as he says, "if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

<sup>805</sup> The summary statements tell of three thousand in Acts 2:41, of an unspecified number in Acts 2:47, of five thousand men in Acts 4:4, and of multitudes of both men and women in Acts 5:14. In Acts 6:1 we learn that "the disciples were increasing in number", and in Acts 6:7 that "the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem". Not only the ordinary citizens of Jerusalem believed, but also "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

<sup>806</sup> See L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 16-17.

It seems, therefore, in order to conclude that in Luke-Acts the distancing and pejorative characterization of "the Jews" is used to designate those among the Jewish population who refuse to believe and accept the good news as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and others.

#### ***14.4.3 The Jews in Luke-Acts Subsequent to Acts 13:46***

Subsequent to the declaration of turning to the Gentiles Paul is found addressing himself to Jews on a number of occasions, "trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets" (Acts 28:23). This is reported in Acts 14:1; 16:13; 17:1, 10; 18:4, 26; 19:8; 28:17, 23. This string of texts gives us a clear indication that the Jews are not rejected. In fact, in place after place Paul adopts a Jewish establishment, specifically the synagogue, as his base of operations, and it is from these congregations of Jews and their associates that Paul draws his first converts in town after town (Acts 13:6, 26; 13:43; 16:14; 17:4).

Not only does Paul continue to go to the synagogues to speak to the Jews, but the Jews are shown as accepting his word and believing in the gospel he preaches, just as the ordinary Jewish people in Luke 3:8 believe in the message of John the Baptist and repent and make public their act of repentance by accepting John's baptism. Even though "the Jews" in Pisidian Antioch oppose him, Paul does not encounter any opposition from Jews in Salamis (Acts 13:4-5), Paphos (Acts 13:6-12), Derbe (Acts 14:20-21), Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), or Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Even in those places where the missionaries do meet with opposition from Jews, it is to be noted that it is generally specified that only "some" (τίνες) oppose the missionaries, even though the "some" may at times appear to be a big number of people, as at Acts 17:5; 18:6. Similarly, in a number of other texts in Acts the reference to "the Jews" is to some clearly identified and specific group of Jews (for example "the Jews of Pisidian Antioch" at Acts 13:43, 45, 50; or "the Jews of Asia" at Acts 21:27-32; 23:27). A very similar pattern is evident in the Third Gospel, where we also see a clear distinction in the reference to "the Jews". Those among the Jewish people who are condemned (or perhaps more accurately in accordance with the texts, those who condemn themselves by rejecting John's or Jesus' message) are always specifically



distinguished from the generality of the Jewish people. They are often identified as "the Pharisees and the lawyers" (Luke 5:27-32; 6:1-5, 6-11; 7:30; 11:53-54), the "scribes" (Luke 9:22; 19:47; 22:2), the "chief priests" (Luke 19:22; 22:2). It is to be noted, however, that even among these groups of specified Jews, not all of those identified rejected Jesus. Some of the Pharisees and elders, for example, are among those who, seized with amazement and filled with awe at Jesus' healing of a paralytic, exclaim: "We have seen strange things today" (Luke 5:26). When Herod plots to have Jesus killed, it is some of the Pharisees who come and tip Jesus off and say to him: "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:31). The scribes are also not averse to giving credit where credit is due, even if it is to Jesus. They are impressed by his handling of the question (from the Sadducees) about marriage and resurrection, and they tell Jesus that he has "spoken well" (Luke 20:39). All these occasions of opposition from some specific groups of people among the Jews occur in situations in which Jesus is otherwise shown as being welcomed and believed in by the majority of Jews, indeed in their thousands (Luke 9:10-17; 6:17-19). Likewise, John the Baptist attracted to himself great multitudes of people. Indeed, so many were the Jewish people who believed in John that their leaders (specifically the scribes and the Pharisees) were afraid of being stoned by them should their opinion of John the Baptist be known to be contrary to the people's high estimation of him (Luke 20:1-6). Similarly, the scribes and the chief priests were for a time unable to do as they pleased with Jesus (that is to say, put him to death) because they were afraid of the many people who believed in him (Luke 22:2). When considering John's reference to the Jews in Luke 3:8, therefore, it is possible to draw the conclusion that he is not rejecting the Jewish people, as indeed they are nowhere else rejected as a nation throughout Luke-Acts. Rather, John invites his people to have a broader and more inclusive understanding of the kind of people acceptable to God: people who repent and ask for forgiveness, whether they be Jews or Gentiles. There is nowhere even a hint that the author of Luke-Acts is anti-semitic in the words he puts into the mouth of John or indeed into the mouths of any of his characters. Instead, what Luke firmly asserts is that Jews and Gentiles belong together in the salvific plan of God, a belief that is already evidenced by John the Baptist.

What emerges from this very brief study of the reference to "the Jews" in Luke-Acts is that this word is not inclusive of all Jews as a nation, and it is certainly not the case

that Jewish people as a nation are opposed to the plan of God as it is revealed in the proclamation of John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, or the evangelizers in Acts. On the contrary, many Jews both in Palestine and in the Diaspora are receptive to the exhortation to repent (and this is evident in their response to John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and Christian evangelizers in Acts), and in so doing assure themselves a position on the 'right side' of the eschatological judgment.

#### 14.4.4 *Paul the Jew*

The discussion on the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of salvation as it is presented in Luke-Acts is, as we have noted, championed in the Third Gospel in an innovative way by John the Baptist's inclusive ministry, and in the Acts of the Apostles by Paul. We have at various points noted John's particular contribution to this interpretation of salvation history. A similar consideration of Paul's role in this respect may help in identifying Luke's overall ideal of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, as well as buttressing the special role that the author of Luke-Acts has assigned to John the Baptist in the inclusion of Gentiles in the *Heilsgeschichte*.

Given the amount of material available on Paul<sup>807</sup>, we will limit ourselves only to a very brief analysis of that information concerning Paul which we are able to gather from the book of Acts. But the question needs to be raised, of course, as to

We first encounter Paul under not very pleasant circumstances; he is not present at Stephen's stoning merely as a curious spectator (Acts 7:58-8:1). We next encounter him "ravaging the church, and entering house after house...binding and delivering to prison both men and women" (Acts 8:3; 9:1-2, 21; 22:4).

<sup>807</sup> Though it is not within our scope to pursue the argument, we should nevertheless note the fact of the obvious discrepancy between the "two Pauls" that we encounter in the New Testament. On the one hand we have the "Lucan Paul", and, on the other, the "Pauline" Paul (i.e. Paul as he presents himself in his letters). E. Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 113-116) lists three major areas in which Luke's picture of Paul is at variance with that of the Paul of the epistles: Paul as miracle worker (Acts 13:6-12; 14:8-10; 20:7-12 ⇔ 2 Corinthians 12:12); Paul as an outstanding orator (Acts 17:22-31; 21:40; 22:1f; 24:1ff ⇔ 2 Corinthians 10:10); non-affirmation of Paul's claim to being an Apostle. In Acts, only the Twelve are Apostles. Luke does not accord Paul this honour, so that even he has to appeal to their authority (Acts 13:31; 10:41; 1:21f ⇔ Galatians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 15:5-8). F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, 52-59) follows, more or less, a similar line of presentation but, unlike Haenchen, he attempts to see also the similarities between Luke's Paul and that of the epistles, but even he is eventually led to the conclusion that "whatever he was in Luke's eyes, Paul was no hero in his own eyes".

We are informed in Acts that Paul, who was initially called Saul (Acts 13:9), was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-29), born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 9:11; 11:25, 21:39; 22:3), but brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). He himself is at great pains to underline his Jewishness (Acts 21:39), and refers to himself as "a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6). He respected the Pharisaic code (Acts 26:5) and held Pharisaic tenets (Acts 26:6). He was brought up strictly according to the Law, and was a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

From a grave threat to the fledgling Christian community (Acts 8:3; 22:4-5) he becomes its unparalleled champion and undertakes three missionary journeys, covering a great part of the Roman empire to spread the gospel (Acts 13-14; 15:36-18:17; 18:18-20:38). The last we hear of him is at Rome itself (Acts 28:28). In Acts 13:44-47 we encounter him at Pisidian Antioch, one of the many stopping points on these missionary journeys.

We noted above a number of aspects regarding Paul, the zealous Jew, "a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6).<sup>808</sup> A look at the background information concerning Paul reveals that the author of Luke-Acts is much concerned to demonstrate that Paul, after his conversion and in the course of his missionary journeys, continues to be a faithful Jew who prays at the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 22:17), and worships the God of Israel's ancestors, "believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14). He preaches nothing that is not found in the law of Moses and in the prophets (Acts 26:22), and he makes a Nazarite vow<sup>809</sup> (Acts 18:18). Out of respect for the Jewish law and out of regard for the Jews of Lystra and Iconium, Paul circumcises Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) before he permits him to accompany him there. R.E. Brown gives a differently nuanced interpretation for Luke's emphasis in stressing Paul's Jewishness. Brown says that

<sup>808</sup> We note, however, that in the letter to the Philippians (3:4-6) Paul insists that he has abandoned his former Pharisaic zeal. He provides us with more biographical data that we do not encounter in Acts. Thus he says of himself, "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless" (Philippians 3:4-6).

<sup>809</sup> See L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 329-330. The word 'Nazarite' is not used at Acts 18:18, but, as Johnson notes, "the term *euchè* here seems clearly to refer to the "Nazarite" vow that is described in Numbers 6:1-21. A Jew could dedicate himself or herself to God in a special way by abstaining from strong drink and uncleanness, and the symbol of this was letting the hair grow during the period of the vow (Numbers 6:5)".

If Paul is pictured as an observant Jew (Acts 21:26), it is not because Luke is appealing to Jewish Christians but because he wants to assure the Gentile children of Paul's mission that they were not fathered by a renegade but by one who was totally faithful to the witness of the Law and the prophets (28:23).<sup>810</sup>

From the account of events not only subsequent to Acts 13:46, but also from the entire Acts narrative, and from what we learn about Paul's own Jewish background it becomes clear here too that Jews are not rejected by Paul in preference to Gentiles. Instead, he is presented in Acts as not only stressing his own Jewishness, but also as observing the legal requirements as passed down through the law of Moses and the prophets. In both the Third Gospel and Acts, the witness to the gospel, whether by John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul or the other evangelists, is made, with a few exceptions, in almost entirely Jewish contexts: in Palestine itself, and in the synagogues of the Diaspora. R.E. Brown, in noting Luke's interest in Judaism, observes that

In the opening chapters of the Gospel and Acts Luke portrays many Jews as...accepting Jesus; but there were also Jews who blinded themselves to the clear line of salvation history which, for Luke, connected Jesus to the history of Israel. Their blindness did not cause the mission to the Gentiles...but it offered an explanation as to why the mission to Israel was now no longer a major issue in the churches Luke knew.<sup>811</sup>

#### 14.4.5 *The Gentiles*

If, as we have seen, the Jews are not rejected in the 'new dispensation', and they are not dispossessed of their ancestral heritage as the people of God, how would the Gentiles in Luke's audience have understood John's reference to God raising "up children to Abraham from these stones", and to the axe having already been laid to the roots of the unfruitful trees? (Luke 3:8-9) If we want to interpret Acts 13:46 to mean that it is on account of the opposition that he at times meets from "the Jews" that Paul turns to the Gentiles, we then must wonder that he does turn to them at all, for he and the other evangelizers in Acts are not always opposed only by Jews. Occasionally the Gentiles are presented as playing a big part in the opposition and persecution that Paul and his companions encounter in some cities. Not rarely are some Gentiles shown to be working against the plan of God by using various stratagems to hinder the success of the gospel.

<sup>810</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 237.

<sup>811</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 236-237.

In the description of Paul's journeys, especially in the middle chapters of Acts, there is an indication that Paul twice experiences significant opposition from Gentiles whose economic livelihood is undermined by his teaching. In the first instance, at Philippi, Paul expels a divining spirit from a servant girl and, by so doing, deprives her masters of the source of their income (Acts 16:16-24). Their response is decisive and swift: they drag Paul and his companion Silas to the market place, where the magistrates have them stripped, flogged and thrown into prison for disturbing the peace. In the second episode, Paul experiences serious opposition from Gentiles at Ephesus as a result of his rejection of idols. Demetrius is portrayed in Acts 19:24-29 as raising a public outcry against Paul and creating much confusion and indignation among the populace of the city whose livelihood and income were tied to the manufacturing of figurines and other religious articles associated with the cult of the goddess Diana.

In chapter 14 of Acts there are two instances in which Paul is opposed by both Jews and Gentiles in Iconium (Acts 14:2-5; 14:19). In both of these cases, however, Paul's initial adversaries are unbelieving Jews. Having rejected Paul's message themselves, they "stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds" against Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:2). Acts 14:5 is quite pointed in showing up both Gentiles and Jews as opponents of Paul: "an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to molest [Paul and Barnabas] and to stone them". Similarly at Acts 14:19, "Jews came [to Lystra] from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people, they stoned Paul", leaving him half-dead. At Philippi (Acts 16:19), however, Paul is opposed only by Gentiles who are not in any way influenced by Jews. The Gentiles resist him entirely on their own initiative.

Thus, the reason for the missionaries' turning to the Gentiles is not to be seen in a too narrow interpretation of Acts 13:46. Paul has his difficulties with both Jews *and* Gentiles. Therefore the Gentiles cannot be seen as having scored any point on the Jews in this respect. As we have briefly shown, in some instances the Gentiles are presented as being more intransigent and on occasion even more dangerous to Paul than are the Jews (see, for example, at Acts 14:19).



#### 14.4.6 *The New Children of Abraham*

Since the Jews are not rejected, nor are the Gentiles a substitute for Israel, what then is the nature of the entity<sup>812</sup> that emerges from a 'mixture' of the two groups? Clearly a new community of 'equal partners' emerges, which Peter, at the end of his discourse in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:43), defines with the words central to our theme: "*every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name*". To his hearers Peter lays down as a basic principle that God shows no ethnic or national partiality, but that he accepts those in any nation who fear him and do what is right (Acts 10:34-35). John the Baptist had already sowed the seed for a new definition of the people of God: it is no longer having "Abraham as our father" that determines who is to be saved at the eschatological judgment, but repentance, baptism, and the forgiveness of sins. Of such as these indeed could Abraham be father. Thus the mission to the Gentiles, with its strong emphasis on repentance and faith, emerges as something that is beneficial to both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>813</sup> On the side of the Jews, it signifies the fulfillment of the promises made to their ancestors, promises for the salvation of Israel and, through her mediation, of the whole world; while for the Gentiles, the mission signifies their fully sharing and participating in the heritage of the children of Abraham.

<sup>812</sup> In Acts the new Jew-Gentile community is given the collective name of "those who believe" (e.g. at Acts 2:44 and at 21:25. This is by far the most common and pervasive designation for those who belong to the new community). They are also called "*brethren*" (the term is used with reference to communities of believers in Lystra and Iconium [Acts 16:2], Thessalonica [Acts 17:6, 10], Berea [Acts 17:14], Corinth [Acts 18:18], Ephesus [Acts 18:27], and Ptolemais [Acts 21:7]); "*ἐκκλησία*" (e.g. at Acts 15:3; 20:17); "*saints*" (only twice, at Acts 9:13 and at 26:10); and "*disciples*" (another of the more frequently occurring designations, used at Acts 13:52; 14:28; 18:23; 21:16).

<sup>813</sup> See J.A. Fitzmyer (*Luke the Theologian*, 194-195), where he notes that, in seeking scriptural proof for the recognition of the share that the Gentiles have in the heritage of Israel, James "lists four prescriptions drawn from Leviticus 17-18 that such Gentile Christians must observe... In other words, Gentile Christians are associated with Jewish Christians and find with them the same salvation "through the grace of our Lord Jesus" (15:11), but they find it not because "the law and the prophets" have been abrogated and are no longer normative, but because the law and the prophets themselves have provided for their share in the very promises made to the fathers of old... Thus reconstituted, Israel is composed of, first and foremost, repentant Jews who have accepted the apostolic proclamation of the gospel and welcomed the "saviour that God has brought to Israel, Jesus, according to (his) promise" (13:23), but also the people taken from among the Gentiles for his name, associated with this Israel. Thus, the very law and the prophets that remain normative for the repentant Israel provides for the association of Gentile converts to it as the one reconstituted people of God". In a different approach, R.C. Tannehill (*The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol.2, 187), notes on the usage of the word *λαός* at 15:14 and 18:10 that "contrary to the narrator's normal pattern of reserving the term *λαός* ("people") for Jews, these two passages apply the term to Gentiles... The speakers are making the important affirmation that Gentiles can be God's *λαός* in the full sense that Israel is... in 15:14 "from the nations (*ἐξ ἐθνῶν*)" indicates the origin and nature of those being chosen. They are Gentiles, not Jews, yet they are now God's people".

The book of Acts recounts the steps by which the covenant community was redefined from its original basis in ethnic Israel to a broader understanding of itself as potentially and actually universal. It therefore comes as no surprise that, in the context of the new community that emerges from an amalgamation of Jews and Gentiles into believers, the universal and global membership of the leadership circle of the community in Antioch is made explicit, for example in Acts 13:1, where we have Barnabas (a Jew from Jerusalem), Simeon, called Niger (a name taken by most as suggesting the bearer was possibly of African ethnic origin),<sup>814</sup> Lucius of Cyrene (a Roman name, from north Africa), Manaen (a transliteration of the Semitic name – Menachem). The leaders of the community, as do the new people of God, come across regional, ethnic, political and ritual boundaries. In Luke-Acts, generally, the motif of the universality of salvation is an undercurrent that is seen in the way the gospel is made available to all kinds of people, whether they be powerful or weak, wealthy or poor, male or female, and of course whether they are Jew or Gentile. The message of salvation is constantly enunciated through proclamation to, or through merciful action, towards powerful military officers (Acts 10:34-48), poor widows (Acts 9:39); common country folk (Acts 14:15-18), proconsuls (Acts 13:7), philosophers (Acts 17:18), governors (Acts 24:10), jailers (Acts 16:30-32), as well as to sailors (Acts 27:25). There is hardly a category of persons that is excluded: all are recipients of the good news of salvation, and all can be saved if they believe in the “Name”, for “Only in [Jesus Christ] is there salvation; for of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In the larger context within which Acts 13:44-47 is located (namely Acts 13:13-14:28 - the first missionary journey of Paul), the beginnings of this redefined covenant community are evident: Jews and Gentiles are gathered together to listen to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:44), Jews and Greeks become ‘disciples’ (Acts 13:52), who, in their turn, become zealous and highly effective messengers of the good news they have received (Acts 13:49).

<sup>814</sup> Cf. L.T. Johnson (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 220), who says, “Like Joseph Barsabbas who came to be called Justus (1:23), and like John who was called Marcus (12:12), Simeon is another Jew who bears a Latin surname. *Niger* in Latin means “black”, and in fact may be a nickname suggestive of an African origin”. F.F. Bruce (*Acts*, 292), is of the opinion that the Latin name *Niger* was given to Simon “perhaps because he was an African”. See also H.C. Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1990, 54.

John's reference to Abraham in Luke 3:7-8 supports, as does Acts 13:44-47, the idea of a new Jewish-Gentile relationship as the basis for a new understanding of the new children of Abraham. It is to be noted in this respect that, alone among the Gospels, Luke extends the quote from Isaiah 40:3-5 by one verse: καὶ ὄψεται *πάντα σὰρξ*<sup>815</sup> τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ ("And all flesh shall see the salvation of God" – Luke 3:6). Luke's common theme of universalism is expressed in this extension. The additional words from Isaiah and their universalistic tone call to mind Simeon's prayer of praise to God upon seeing the baby Jesus: "for my eyes have seen your salvation ὃ ἡτοίμασας κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν λαῶν, φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν ἐθνῶν καὶ δόξαν λαοῦ σου Ἰσραήλ ("which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel" – Luke 2:30). This new identity that John implicitly but nonetheless clearly launches, and which Paul actively works to bring about, is a community of God composed of individuals who are neither Jew nor Gentile, people who believe and consequently produce good fruit. These are the new conditions for salvation, and this is the new way of understanding themselves that both John and Paul wish their audiences to cultivate. B.S. Childs has neatly captured the essence of the concept of the new children of Abraham in his observation that

Genesis makes it clear that the election of Israel was a means and not the end of God's purpose for the world. In the important passage of God's promise to Abraham of a posterity (12:1ff), the fundamental relationship between Israel and the nations is spelled out. 'God said to Abraham: I will make of you a great nation and I will bless your name...and by you shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (vv. 2f.).<sup>816</sup>

All in all, Luke's interest in Jews and Judaism, whether this is expressed through characters such as John the Baptist or Paul, has been well noted. R.E. Brown expresses this well when he says that

<sup>815</sup> Our italics, in this and the next verse.

<sup>816</sup> B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 103.

Luke's interest in Judaism reflects an attempt at self-understanding on the part of a Gentile Christian community. For Luke, the mission to the Gentiles was no aberration nor a desperate alternative for the mission to Israel. Rather it had been God's plan from the beginning that Jesus should be both a revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel (2:32). In the opening chapters of the Gospel and of Acts Luke portrays many Jews as seeing this and accepting Jesus; but there were also Jews who blinded themselves to the clear line of salvation history which, for Luke, connected Jesus to the history of Israel. Their blindness did not cause the mission to the Gentiles...but it offered an explanation as to why the mission to Israel was now no longer a major issue in the churches Luke knew.<sup>817</sup>

## 15. JOHN THE BAPTIST AS PROPHET IN LUKE-ACTS

### 15.1 *Prophecy in Luke-Acts*

We have in various ways frequently noted in the course of this study that in Luke-Acts one of the key qualities associated with John the Baptist is that he was a prophet. This places John within an ancient tradition that is very significant for our reading of both the Old Testament and, at least in the way in which the phenomenon is at times interpreted in Luke-Acts, the New Testament as well.

The word προφήτης occurs some 144 times in the New Testament, most frequently in Luke-Acts (29 times in the Third Gospel and 30 times in Acts).<sup>818</sup> The role and function of prophecy in early Christianity have in the last few decades been investigated by a number of scholars.<sup>819</sup> In the Foreword to T.W. Gillespie's book, *The First Theologians: A Study in Early Christian Prophecy* (1994), M. Welker highlights the importance of understanding New Testament prophecy as a launch pad for the general appreciation of the heart of the Christian message. Welker especially underlines the fact that

we must not content ourselves with understanding and interpreting the complex of "the prophetic" as a phenomenon of past cultures. According to key texts of both Testaments, the "pouring out of the Spirit" is connected with a complex interplay of experience of God and perceptions of reality on the part of diverse people and groups of people. This "proclamatory" interaction is characterized both directly and indirectly as "prophetic speech". This means that anyone who wants to grasp the forces at work

<sup>817</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 236-237.

<sup>818</sup> See further *EDNT*, volume 3 (1993), 183-186.

<sup>819</sup> Among these, see, for example, H.A. Guy, *New Testament Prophecy*, London, Epworth Press, 1947; T.M. Crone, *Early Christian Prophecy*, Baltimore, St. Mary's University Press, 1973; J. Reiling, *Hermas and Christian Prophecy*, Leiden, Brill, 1973; G. Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1975; E.E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1978; D.L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980; D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983; A.C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990.

in the creative and critical spiritual interaction of women and men, of old and young, and of persons from diverse social and cultural spheres, will have to try to work out a clear understanding of "the prophetic."<sup>820</sup>

Though Welker speaks in terms broadly applicable to the New Testament as a whole, his observation is especially true of Luke-Acts, a work in which prophecy is akin to the soul that enlivens the body. Prophecy is one of the key means through which is fulfilled the plan of God for the salvation of all humanity. As will be noted below, Luke-Acts has by far the highest number of occurrences of the word *προφήτης* applied to non-Old Testament prophetic figures. The book of Acts, especially, is bristling with prophets and prophetesses. And, as we shall see below, John the Baptist is the prophet *par excellence* in Luke-Acts, a prophet in whom two major periods in the *Heilsgeschichte* meet and merge. It is notable how Luke has Zechariah proclaim John his son as being not only a prophet, but "*προφήτης ὑψίστου*"—a prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76). As if his audience should still be in some doubt about this, Luke emphasizes the point in a way designed to remove all doubt whatsoever: John is, yes, a prophet, but "more than a prophet" (Luke 7:26). Indeed, John is the like of a prophet the world has never seen before, for Luke has Jesus say of John the Baptist: "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28).

The fulfillment of prophecy in Luke-Acts is synonymous with the achievement of the divine plan and purpose. Scripture is fulfilled in accordance with the divine plan for the salvation of humanity. For this reason, prophecy is very significant to Luke-Acts, for it is in its fulfillment that the divine plan is realized. D.E. Aune has captured well the function of prophecy in Luke-Acts:

The wealth of material on the subject of prophets and prophecy in Acts is certainly of great value...In Luke-Acts...oracles and divine revelations of various kinds have an important *literary* function. The copious references to prophecies, visions, miracles, and persons "filled with the Holy Spirit" that punctuate the narrative at critical junctures provide an exciting force which controls the movement of the plot. The beginning of the Gospel of Luke also exhibits a flurry of prophetic activity surrounding the birth and early years of both John the Baptist and Jesus.<sup>821</sup>

<sup>820</sup> T.W. Gillespie, *The First Theologians: A Study in Early Christian Prophecy*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, ix-x.

<sup>821</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 192.



Though the word προφήτης and its cognates appear very frequently in the New Testament, it is not always used with reference to the Old Testament prophets. While in Judaism the word προφήτης was only very rarely applied to those who were not prophets in the Old Testament sense, early Christianity was not averse to applying the word in such a way that it covered a broader category of people. Prophets were thus not an old phenomenon, dead and buried, but an institution still considered alive in the Christianity of Luke's days. Of its 59 occurrences in Luke-Acts, the word προφήτης is applied to non-Old Testament prophets some 12 times. This indicates, as we have already noted, that "the reluctance to apply the designation to contemporary figures [had been] completely overcome, and the term *prophētēs* was freely applied to those who were regarded as inspired spokesmen of God".<sup>822</sup>

But what was it that, specifically in Luke-Acts, qualified one to be a prophet? It is to be noted that in Luke-Acts the term προφήτης (or προφήτις = prophetess), when applied in a non-Old Testament context or to a non-Old Testament individual, is used almost exclusively after the Pentecost experience. Two things immediately become apparent: firstly, post-Old Testament prophecy is very closely connected with the Holy Spirit and, secondly, a prophet in the Lucan sense (as in the Pauline use and understanding of the term) is primarily a believer. A prophet is one who has received the Holy Spirit and, presumably, the ability to speak in tongues or to interpret tongues.

This assertion, of course, raises the question: in Luke-Acts (and indeed in the New Testament as a whole): Were all Christian believers, then, potential (or actual) prophets? In the Acts of the Apostles, prophets emerge as a sign of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. According to Acts 2:17-21; 19:6, all believers have the gift of prophecy. Paul, however, distinguishes clearly between apostles, prophets, and teachers, and in 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 he takes the position that not all can possess the triad of gifts, by which he means not all can be apostles, or prophets, or teachers:

God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership,

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<sup>822</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 195.

various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

For Paul, therefore, prophecy is a gift that is given only to some, and for the specific purpose of using it in the liturgical celebration of the community (1 Corinthians 12-14).

We will return to this question below, where we will also see that in Luke-Acts, though every Christian is a prophet to a varying degree, it is the vocation and duty of every Christian to be a witness. For now, however, it remains for us to dwell a little bit longer on the relationship between prophecy and the Holy Spirit. Very frequently in Luke-Acts, a prophetic word or prophetic event is almost always immediately or soon after associated in some way with the Holy Spirit. The following illustration of a few instances may perhaps help us to appreciate the very strong bond between prophecy and the Holy Spirit:

Prophetic Word / Deed	Association with the Holy Spirit
<b>Luke 1:76</b> Zechariah proclaims that his son, John, "will be called the <i>prophet</i> of the Most High".	<b>Luke 1:67</b> Zechariah makes the proclamation in verse 76 because he "was filled with the <i>Holy Spirit</i> ".
<b>Luke 4:1</b> Jesus is led to the <i>wilderness</i> , a location long associated with prophets in the Jewish tradition.	<b>Luke 4:1</b> Jesus, "full of the <i>Holy Spirit</i> , returned from the Jordan, and was led by the <i>Spirit</i> ".
<b>Luke 3:2</b> "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the <i>wilderness</i> " – both the wilderness and John's proclamation are set in prophetic mode, and John's ministry is associated with the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3	<b>Luke 3:16</b> John's work and ministry are to be completed by a baptism in the <i>Holy Spirit</i> .
<b>Luke 4:16-21</b> Jesus reads from the <i>prophet Isaiah</i> 61:1-4 in the synagogue at Nazareth.	<b>Luke 4:14</b> Jesus returns to Nazareth "in the power of the <i>Spirit</i> ".
<b>Acts 2:14-18</b> Peter, in his Pentecost speech, quotes from the prophet Joel 3:1-5, which speaks of the Holy Spirit being poured on "sons and daughters, menservants and maidservants", as a result of which " <i>they will prophesy</i> ".	<b>Acts 2:17-18</b> Peter's Pentecost speech, a speech that is inspired by the recently received <i>Holy Spirit</i> (Acts 2:1-4), in which Peter prophesies (on the strength of Joel 3:1-5) that more of the <i>Holy Spirit</i> is still to be poured upon all for the purpose of prophesying.
<b>Acts 11:28</b> The <i>prophet Agabus</i> foretells a great famine over the whole world.	<b>Acts 11:28</b> It is by the <i>Holy Spirit</i> that Agabus foretells the drought.
<b>Acts 13:1</b> The <i>prophets</i> of the church in Antioch: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen.	<b>Acts 13:2</b> The <i>Holy Spirit</i> commands the four prophets to set Saul and Barnabas apart for what is, in fact, the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles. The mission to the Gentiles is thus initiated through the promptings of the <i>Holy Spirit</i> .
<b>Acts 13:6-7</b> The Jewish magician, described as "a <i>false prophet</i> ".	<b>Acts 13:9-11</b> Saul, now called Paul, is "filled with the <i>Holy Spirit</i> ", in the power of which he is able to counter the Jewish false prophet, whom he calls a "son of the devil, an enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy". <i>The Holy Spirit is opposed to the false prophet.</i>
<b>Acts 19:6</b> The 12 disciples at Ephesus who knew only the baptism of John " <i>spoke with tongues and prophesied</i> " after they have received the Holy Spirit, having been re-baptized in the name of Jesus.	<b>Acts 19:6</b> "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, <i>the Holy Spirit came on them</i> ; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied."
<b>Acts 21:10</b> Agabus the <i>prophet</i> prophesies the persecution of Paul by the Gentiles.	<b>Acts 21:11</b> The prophet Agabus, filled with the <i>Holy Spirit</i> , foretells the persecution of Paul.

### *15.2 Solitary Prophet and Communal Prophet*

How does this inseparable link between prophecy and the Holy Spirit in the life of early Christian prophets relate to the prophethood of John the Baptist? It will be remembered that the author of Luke-Acts is at pains at the beginning of his work to underline the action of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic birth and ministry of John. Thus Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit while she was carrying the infant John in her womb (Luke 1:41); filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah outlines the programme of the life and future ministry of his son John, "a prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:67-79); and it is as such, as a prophet of the Most High, and filled with the Holy Spirit, that John baptizes and preaches to the multitudes, the tax collectors, and the soldiers (Luke 3:10-14). Thus the parallelism between John the Baptist as prophet, full of the Holy Spirit from his birth, and the prophets of early Christianity, likewise either full of the Holy Spirit, or commanded by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2), and inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues and to prophecy (Acts 19:4, see also 2:4), is carefully crafted by the author of Luke-Acts in such a way that John and some in the early Christian community are imbued with similar characteristics: they are both prophets and they both act in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Unlike in 1 Corinthians 12-14, where it appears that prophets played a particular role during a particular segment of Christian worship,<sup>823</sup> the prophets of Luke-Acts were active evangelizers and witnesses to the kerygma, constantly on the move (see Acts 13:1; 15:22-34). As D.E. Aune has noted, the "instances of prophetic itinerancy [in Acts] are the only NT examples of trips taken by prophets for the specific purpose of exercising their prophetic gifts".<sup>824</sup> This is the second major characteristic of prophets in Luke-Acts. Driven by the power of the Holy Spirit, the prophets and prophetesses of Acts become indefatigable proclaimers of the good news, in much the same way as John the Baptist is associated with a powerful proclamation of the good news in Luke 3:18. In Acts 11:27-30, a group of prophets, among them Agabus, is reported as

<sup>823</sup> See 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others [i.e. the other prophets] weigh what is said." D.E. Aune comments that "if we interpret [this passage] correctly, seems to imply that the prophets exercise their revelatory gifts at a particular point in the proceedings and then when they are not prophesying they are expected to participate in the evaluation of the prophetic utterances of others...Paul conceptualizes those who prophesy at Corinth as "prophets" (I Cor. 14:29, 32, 37) and regards prophets as holding a particular office in the church second only to apostles (I Cor. 12:28-29)".

<sup>824</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 212.

travelling from Jerusalem to Antioch. Agabus is later shown travelling from Judea to Caesarea to deliver a prophetic warning to Paul (Acts 21:8-11). Acts 15:22-35 reports that Judas and Silas (designated prophets at Acts 15:32) were sent to Antioch from Jerusalem to communicate to the community there the contents of the letter written to them by the apostles and elders.

D.E. Aune has noted the broader significance of the "itinerant prophets" within the Synoptic tradition. In essence, Aune observes that it was thanks to these prophets that the Synoptic tradition was transmitted:

A crucial presupposition...is that those communities and individuals through whom the synoptic tradition was transmitted contributed to its formulation by superimposing their own perspectives onto the sayings and stories of Jesus. One important presynoptic source was the "Q" document, a sayings source used by both Matthew and Luke. This document is thought to have been transmitted and shaped by the "Q" community, a group that is thought to have been heavily involved in charismatic and prophetic activity...The itinerant character of the prophetic mission of the representative of the Q community is extrapolated from the synoptic narratives of the sending of the Twelve (Mark 6:7-13; Matt. 10:5-42; Luke 9:1-6), which is widely regarded as reflecting the praxis of the Q community.<sup>825</sup>

These observations are significant for our study of the prophetic ministry of believers in Luke-Acts because they highlight an important characteristic of prophecy, namely the missionary dimension, which Aune refers to as "itinerant prophecy for a specific purpose". In Luke-Acts, John the Baptist is shown to be such an itinerant prophet with a very clear purpose: John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Likewise in Acts, the itinerant Paul "went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). In Luke-Acts, therefore, there is a close relationship between prophetic utterance and divine commission.<sup>826</sup> prophetic mission is mission *to* and mission *for*. This is evident in John's mission as well as in the mission of the prophets of Acts.

Aune has also made a fascinating study on the Agabus text in Acts 21:11:

<sup>825</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 213.

<sup>826</sup> See also D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 266.



While we were staying [in Caesarea, at Philip's house] for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us and took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

This text of Acts is, as Aune has observed, "one of the few early Christian literary sources that explicitly quotes the oracles of Christian prophets".<sup>827</sup> Aune notes, among other attractive observations, that in this text the author of Luke-Acts comes closest of all New Testament writers to the fullness of Old Testament prophetic expression. Acts 21:11 is written with

a formality rarely preserved in early Christian literature, complete with a messenger formula which is a slight Christian variant of the OT expression "thus says Yahweh... The oracle itself is introduced through the use of a Christianized variant of the OT messenger formula; "thus says the Holy Spirit" is certainly a close approximation of the familiar "thus says Yahweh".<sup>828</sup>

Aune has also noted the significance of the symbolic action described in Acts 21:11. Agabus takes hold of Paul's girdle and, by binding himself, uses it to symbolize as well as to interpret his prophecy about Paul. This recalls the symbolic actions and interpretations of Old Testament prophets like Hosea, whose marriage to an unfaithful wife whom he does not divorce symbolizes the unfaithfulness of Israel, while Yahweh remains all the time steadfast and true (Hosea 1:2; 3:1); in 1 Kings 22:11, Zedekiah is shown making iron horns and prophesying to Ahab and Jehoshaphat: "Thus says the Lord: With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed." In Isaiah 20:1-6 we have a report of Isaiah going about naked, symbolizing the way in which the Egyptians and the Ethiopians would be led away as captives, 'naked' before their Assyrian captors.<sup>829</sup>

The prophetic use of imagery or symbolism to convey the message of the prophet is seen also in the description of the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts. The symbol most associated with John is that of water, denoting as it does both cleanliness and sustenance: cleanliness symbolizing repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>827</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 263.

<sup>828</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 263.

<sup>829</sup> See further Jeremiah 19:1-15; 27-28, and also D.E. Aune for a report on symbolic prophetic actions, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 100-101.

Baptism was more than just a ritual act; it spoke of a humanity washed and cleansed in body and mind before God and before one's neighbours. Water as a symbol of sustenance stands for salvation and redemption, and the restoration of one's facultative and mental powers to the wholeness that recalls the original state of humanity before God at the creation (Genesis 1:26-31).

In Acts, prophets did not minister in isolation (Acts 11:27-28; 13:1-3; see also 15:32), though in Acts 21:10 Agabus appears to be the only prophet present. Communal prophecy is emphasized in Acts 2:1-21; 8:14-17; 10:44-46; 19:6-7. An element common to all these incidents is that they are "depicted as the initial effect of the infilling of the Holy Spirit experienced by a group which had not previously enjoyed the divine presence in their midst".<sup>830</sup>

Also, in Luke-Acts, and especially in Acts, some of the Christian prophets were leaders in their congregations, such as at Acts 11:27-30 (prophets at Jerusalem); 13:1-3 (prophets at Antioch); 15: 32 (prophets at Antioch). In Acts, the relationship between prophets and other leaders in the Christian communities was essentially one of ministerial collaboration. While the prophets were regarded as sources of authentic divine communication or revelation, it was basically up to the other leaders within the community to execute the divine communication, as we can see at Acts 15:28; 21:10-14. We do not have in Luke-Acts, as we do in the Pauline and other New Testament writings, any indication that the prophets, though very important, played a formal and structured leadership role. What we have instead is a harmonious ministerial collaboration between the prophets and the other leaders, namely the apostles and the teachers. Contrast this with the rather frequent occurrences of conflict and misunderstanding between prophets and other community officials in Mark 13:22; Matthew 7:15-23; 24:11; 1 John 4:1-3. Occasionally prophets are presented as both apostles and teachers (the case with Saul and Barnabas at Acts 14:4, 14), and leaders (as with Silas and Judas at Acts 15:32, 22).

Prophecy as a ministry is highly regarded in Luke-Acts. In 1 Corinthians 12:28-31 Paul establishes a hierarchy of gifts: "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers,

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<sup>830</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 199.

then workers of miracles, then healers..." Frequently the author of Luke-Acts works with the same triad: apostles-prophets-teachers". Persons described as prophets in Luke-Acts are mentioned either with apostles (as at Luke 11:49) or with teachers (Acts 13:1). This suggests that prophets occupied a significant position in their communities.<sup>831</sup> Throughout, prophets are seen as people through whom God spoke, hence the oft-recurring phrase διὰ στόματος πάντων τῶν προφητῶν (for example at Acts 3:18, 21).

### 15.3 *John the Baptist as Prophet*

By all accounts, what we have is an impressive and at times quite intriguing narrative of the description (actual or imaginary) of the life of John the Baptist. According to the author of Luke-Acts, John is pre-eminently a prophet. Very little is left to the imagination regarding his prophetic role. In essentially prophetic motifs, John "will go before [the Lord God] in the spirit of Elijah" (Luke 1:17); he "will be called the prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76); he "was in the wilderness" (Luke 1:80).<sup>832</sup> The reference to John's being in the wilderness is in keeping with the citation from Isaiah which is applied explicitly to John:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Luke 3:4-6, quoting Isaiah 40:3-5)<sup>833</sup>

We have already noted the significance of the wilderness for the people of Israel of all generations, and particularly those of the time of John the Baptist. The wilderness was not only a geographical area, but a region rich with historical and theological connotations.

<sup>831</sup> See also at 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Revelations 18:20.

<sup>832</sup> We have already noted the significance of the wilderness for the people of Israel. It symbolized an age when Israel was still uncorrupted, the time of Moses, of the Covenant, of the giving of the Law. It was undoubtedly for these, among other reasons, that the Qumran community and other sects moved to the wilderness, because Israel's eschatological redemption was to come about there. See also C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 41-48.

<sup>833</sup> The significance of the Isaiah text for the Qumran community (1QS VIII.14), as well as John's priestly descent (Luke 1:8-23), his living in the wilderness (Luke 1:80), and his baptizing ministry (Luke 3:3; 16) – recalling as it does the ritual cleansing and water purification of the sectarians – has led some to conjecture that John may have at some point been a member of the community of Qumran, or at least that he was informed of their practices. Much as this may be a fascinating topic to pursue, it is beyond the scope of our present topic to do so. We must for the time being leave it to others. Therefore see, for example, J. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 325-330.

Apart from the usual associations with Moses, the giving of the Law, the Covenant, and other saving activities of Yahweh kept sacred in the Law and in the collective national memory, the wilderness symbolized for the people of Israel the place in which Elijah, having fled from Jezebel's murderous intentions, heard the voice of Yahweh in a light murmuring wind (1 Kings 19:9-12). David also sought refuge in the wilderness when he ran away from Saul (1 Samuel 23-26). Because of these, and more, historical associations, the wilderness also took on eschatological associations. In the same manner that the wilderness had been the arena of Yahweh's initial and – in the case of the Qumran community and other sects – ongoing deliverance of his people, so too the wilderness would be the scene of Yahweh's future deliverance of his people. The prophet Hosea explicitly expresses this national hope when he says:

But look, I am going to seduce her  
and lead her into the desert  
and speak to her heart.  
There I shall give her back her vineyards,  
and make the Vale of Achor a gateway of hope.  
There she will respond as when she was young  
as on the day when she came up from Egypt.

In the case of John the Baptist, the wilderness is where he spent his youth (concerning which see the footnotes above); it was where he received his prophetic call (Luke 3:2) it was where he first appeared, proclaiming his message of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:1); and from what Jesus says about John in Luke 7:24-26, it was to the wilderness the crowds went in order to see and hear John.

However, without getting too carried away by the positive significance of the wilderness both for the nation of Israel as well as for individual sects (and indeed for private individuals), it must be noted that the wilderness was also the place associated with evil spirits. It is in the wilderness that Azazel is sent to dwell in the scapegoat bearing the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:5-10). In Matthew 12:43, the unclean spirit ejected by Jesus wanders through the wilderness, seeking refuge but finding none. It was also to the wilderness that Jesus was led, there to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-13).

Indeed, the entire setting of the birth and early life of John is couched in prophetic themes and motifs. The language used recalls similar events in the lives of well-known leaders and/or prophets of Israel. There is hardly a sentence that does not in some way echo a word, a phrase, or an idea from the Old Testament. Thus, for example, the great age of John's parents who, though righteous, are weighed down by the "disgrace" of childlessness (Genesis 30:23; Luke 1:6-7), echoes the situation of the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-5), the mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:4-18), as well as more nearly the situation of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:11, even to the point of Elizabeth's ironic response to the incongruousness of her situation: "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men" (Luke 1:25) which echoes Sarah's response to *her* situation: "Sarah laughed to herself thinking, 'Now that I am past the age of childbearing, and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?'" (Genesis 18:12). Furthermore, the task given to John (Luke 1:17) is described in the terminology of Malachi 3:23-24. Indeed, in John is fulfilled this prophecy of Malachi:

Look, I shall send you the prophet Elijah before the great and awesome Day of Yahweh comes. He will reconcile parents to their children and children to their parents, to forestall my putting the country under the curse of destruction.

Zechariah's doubting of the word of the angel (Luke 1:18 – "And Zechariah said... 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years'"), recalls Abraham's doubt and cynical disbelief (Genesis 17:17 – "Abraham... laughed, thinking to himself, 'Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old, and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?'"). Zechariah's prophecy about his son (Luke 1:68-79) is a patchwork of quotations from various prophets, among them Ezekiel 29:21; Michah 4:10; 7:20; Jeremiah 11:5; 23:5; Zechariah 3:8; Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; 42:7; 59:8; 60:1.

John's ministry is introduced in terminology reminiscent of prophetic vocation:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness... (Luke 3:1-2)



Which echoes the vocation Jeremiah:

The words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, one of the priests living at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of Yahweh came to him in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign; then in the days of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the deportation of Jerusalem, in the fifth month. (Jeremiah 1:1-3)

As in an earlier instance (Luke 1:17, in which John fulfills the prophecy of Malachi 3:23), Isaiah's prophecy (40:2-5) is applied to John (Luke 3:4-6).

So, the prophetic function of John is very much to the fore in the reader's first encounter with him in Luke-Acts. However, that is not yet the sum total of this figure in the narrative. John is also a social prophet in the mould of, for example, Jeremiah (2:1-37; 5:1-17), and his task is to re-instil in his audience a respect for the poor (Luke 3:11), a genuine distaste for greed (Luke 3:12-13), and the appropriate use of authority (Luke 3:14).

It has been our thesis from the start that in Luke-Acts John the Baptist epitomizes the prophetic and witness mandate of the Christian believer. It is thus not to be wondered at that both prophecy and the fulfillment thereof, as well as witnessing are prominent motifs in Luke-Acts. So significant is this theme that the importance of individual characters in Luke-Acts can almost be said to be determined by the degree to which their lives and actions can be correlated to either some prophetic individual or prophetic utterance in the Old Testament. Among the evangelists Matthew is well-noted for his sophisticated use of the 'proof-from-prophecy' formula, for example in Matthew 1:22-23:

All this took place *to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet* (ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος): "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel".

and in Matthew 2:5-6:

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; *for so it is written by the prophet* (οὕτως γὰρ γέγραπται διὰ τοῦ προφήτου): 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah'".

The author of Luke-Acts, on the other hand, refines this concept. For our author, it is not only events in the life of John or Jesus that fulfill prophecy,<sup>834</sup> but also events in the life of the early Christian community in Acts. So, for example, at Acts 13:46-47:

Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

In this text, the prophecies of Isaiah 45:21, 49:6; Jeremiah 12:15; and Amos 9:11 are fulfilled in the lives and ministries of members of the early Christian community. Thus Paul and Barnabas establish that the salvation of the Gentiles, so long foretold in the prophetic tradition of Israel, is in keeping with the prophetic words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos. The mission to the Gentiles is the fulfillment of prophecy.

Yet another major theme that is used in Luke-Acts to justify the mission to the Gentiles is that of fulfillment of prophecy. The importance to Luke's literary and theological purposes<sup>835</sup> of the theme of the fulfillment of both promise and prophecy is to be seen in, for example, the way he has made it prominent at the beginning of the Third Gospel and Acts, as well as at the end of each book. The words specifically highlighting the fulfillment of God's promises and prophecies are indicated in bold italics in the following schema:

<sup>834</sup> See, for example, Jesus' statement to the perplexed duo on their way to Emmaus: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." See also Luke 18:31, "Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished".

<sup>835</sup> For H. Conzelmann (*The Theology of St. Luke*, 150), it is fulfilled prophecy in particular that creates the continuity between the Gospel and Acts. On the fulfillment of prophecy in Luke-Acts see also L.T. Johnson, *The Literary Functions of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, Missoula, Scholars Press, 1977, 17-18; J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 121-154.

## FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY IN LUKE-ACTS

	BEGINNING	ENDING
LUKE	<p>Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,</p> <p>καθὼς ἐλάλησεν διὰ στόματος τῶν ἁγίων ἀπ' αἰῶνος προφητῶν αὐτοῦ,</p> <p>that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us;</p> <p>ποιῆσαι ἔλεος μετὰ τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν καὶ μνησθῆναι διαθήκης ἁγίας αὐτοῦ... (1:67-75)</p>	<p>These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that</p> <p>δεῖ πληρωθῆναι πάντα τὰ γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ νόμῳ Μωϋσέως καὶ τοῖς προφήταις καὶ ψαλμοῖς περὶ ἐμοῦ. <sup>45</sup> τότε διήνοιξεν αὐτῶν τὸν νοῦν τοῦ συνιέναι τὰς γραφάς· <sup>46</sup> καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὅτι οὕτως γέγραπται,</p> <p>that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (24:44-47)</p>
ACTS	<p>Brethren,</p> <p>ἔδει πληρωθῆναι τὴν γραφὴν ἣν προεῖπεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον διὰ στόματος Δαυὶδ,</p> <p>concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus...</p> <p>γέγραπται γὰρ ἐν βίβλῳ ψαλμῶν· γενηθήτω ἡ ἔπαυλις αὐτοῦ ἔρημος καὶ μὴ ἔστω ὁ κατοικῶν ἐν αὐτῇ, καί· τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν αὐτοῦ λαβέτω ἕτερος. (1:15-20)</p>	<p>And he expounded the matter to them from morning till evening,</p> <p>διαμαρτυρόμενος τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, πείθων τε αὐτοὺς περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἀπὸ τε τοῦ νόμου Μωϋσέως καὶ τῶν προφητῶν...</p> <p>So, as they disagreed among themselves, they departed, after Paul had made one statement:</p> <p>καλῶς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐλάλησεν διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ὑμῶν <sup>26</sup> λέγων· πορεύθητι πρὸς τὸν λαὸν τοῦτον καὶ εἰπόν ..... (28:23-27)</p>

This schema shows how the place of prophecies in Luke-Acts is very significant, for they show how events occurred in accordance with the plan of God which was declared of old (Luke 2:26-32; 3:4-6; 24:46-47; Acts 2:16-21, 39; 3:25; 13:47; 15:15-17).<sup>836</sup> It is in the context of these promises that John's ministry is to be understood.

#### **15.4 John the Baptist as Prophet and Early Christian Prophets**

Already in the first chapters of Acts we have an indication of the ongoing fulfillment of scripture (1:16-20; 2:16-21). Thus Peter, quoting Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh in the last days (Joel 2:28-32) in his Pentecost speech (Acts 2:16-21), alludes to a prophetic justification for the mission to the Gentiles: "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται.- Acts 2:21).

At the 'council' of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the mission to the Gentiles is eventually 'passed' because Peter's account of how he had been led by God to preach to the Gentiles (10:1-11:18), as well as Barnabas' and Paul's report about how they had been led to work extensively among the Gentiles (13:2-14:28) are said to "agree" with the words of the prophets (συμφωνοῦσιν οἱ λόγοι τῶν προφητῶν - 15:15). James, whose judgment eventually carries the day and leads to a unanimous decision in favour of the mission to the Gentiles, quotes a string of prophetic texts to justify his position on the matter. He cites Jeremiah 12:15, Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 45:21 to show that the Gentile mission is a valid part of God's plan.<sup>837</sup>

Paul, in his turn, legitimates his activity among the Gentiles from a Jewish standpoint. At the end of his sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:40-41) he quotes Habakkuk 1:5 as a warning against those who refuse to acknowledge God's deeds in their own time. The

<sup>836</sup> According to J.T. Squires (*The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 149-153), recourse to the prophecies of scripture in Luke-Acts is an apologetic tool that Luke uses and it is found in contexts where early Christians are engaged in dispute with Jews, both in Jerusalem and in the Diaspora. Any claim that what happened to Jesus or among the Gentiles was a betrayal of the Jewish faith is apologetically countered through the motif of fulfilled prophecy. As Squires says, "The note of fulfilled prophecy is especially prominent in those parts of Acts which detail the mission to the Gentiles, where it is used apologetically. Jewish criticisms of the Gentile mission undoubtedly focused on the apparent abandonment of the Law by early Jewish-Christian missionaries and the consequent illegitimacy of the Christian faith. Against such criticisms, Luke reports how the Christians defended these activities by recourse to the Hebrew scriptures".

<sup>837</sup> See J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 149.

very lack of faith which Habakkuk had predicted<sup>838</sup> immediately occurs in Pisidian Antioch when "the Jews" contradict and revile him. Paul counters by quoting Isaiah 49:6 as a justification for his turning to the Gentiles, and as a witness that God's salvation extends to "the uttermost parts of the earth".<sup>839</sup> The climax of Paul's interpretation of his work as fulfillment of prophecy occurs at his self-defence before Agrippa (Acts 26:22-23), when he says:

To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, *saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass*, that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would *proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles*.

These developments are, for Luke, among "the things which have been accomplished among us", both because God willed them and because God foretold them through his chosen instruments the prophets of old (Luke 1:1; see also Acts 3:24; 13:40; 15:15; 28:25-27).

More importantly for our present purposes, however, is the way in which John the Baptist is shown as not only fulfilling prophecy, but as being a prophet himself. This is acknowledged by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, as well as by Jesus and some others. In the birth narrative the second oracle concerning John, that voiced by his father Zechariah, is: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-77). 'Prophet' is the key term that appears in nearly all the Gospels as a description of John the Baptist. This is particularly evident in Luke's Gospel where, in material unique to this author, John is presented as preaching a message that has obvious prophetic overtones. For example, our author has John say to the multitudes that came to hear him:

Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father", for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham...every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise...Collect no more than is appointed you...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation... (Luke 3:8-14).

<sup>838</sup> "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told". (Habakkuk 1:5)

<sup>839</sup> See also B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1992, 292.



In his warnings against the consequences of the impending judgment John clearly stands in the tradition of the prophets. He addresses basic socio-economic issues that concern the society of his day, faithful to a prophetic style that evokes the memory of Old Testament prophets like Amos and Isaiah. Like the prophets of old, John the Baptist in Luke-Acts defines righteousness in terms of social justice rather than in terms of religious affiliation (Jew or Gentile), wealth or social status (rich or poor), or nationality (Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile). John the Baptist's pre-occupation with the social concerns of the people of his time, as well as his fearless moral stance before king Herod, who eventually disposes of the offending thorn in his flesh, bear testimony to the prophetic mould in which John is cast. It is to be noted, too, that Luke's 'historical' prologue to John's ministry (Luke 3:1-2) also shows that Luke clearly regarded John as a prophet. John is called to his ministry in a way reminiscent of the calling of the prophets of the Old Testament:<sup>840</sup> "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness..." (Luke 3:2). Furthermore, when Jesus pulls one over the chief priests and scribes by posing a tricky question ("Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" Luke 20:4), Luke reports that the chief priests and scribes were afraid that "all the people will stone us, *for they are convinced that John was a prophet*" (πεπεισμένους γὰρ ἔστιν Ἰωάννην προφήτην εἶναι - Luke 20:5-7).<sup>841</sup>

The depiction of John as a prophet in First Century C.E. Judaism as well as in the earliest Christian tradition should not, in itself, be surprising. In the time of John the Baptist the view was commonly held among the Jewish society of his time that prophecy was dead.<sup>842</sup> This view was already expressed in some Old Testament writings, for example in Zechariah 13:2-6:

<sup>840</sup> See, for example, the vocation of Jeremiah (1:1-3), Ezekiel (1:1-3), Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Micah 1:1, and many others.

<sup>841</sup> See also Matthew's abridgement of Mark's version of the account of John's death: "Though [Herod] wanted to put [John] to death, he feared the people, because *they held him to be a prophet*" (Matthew 14:5). Our italics.

<sup>842</sup> Earliest Christianity, however, revived the spirit of prophecy and viewed prophecy as having been re-instituted by John the Baptist and Jesus. In Luke-Acts (and in the Pauline and other Christian churches) we see a strong revival of prophecy. A number among the Christian believers in Acts and in Paul's churches were prophets who played a significant role in the lives of their communities.

*I shall rid the country of the prophets, and of the spirit of impurity.* Then, if anyone still goes on prophesying, his parents, his own father and mother will say to him, "You shall not live, since you utter lies in Yahweh's name." And even while he is prophesying, his parents, his own father and mother will pierce him through. When that day comes, the prophets will all be ashamed to relate their visions when they prophesy and no longer put on their hair cloaks with intent to deceive. Instead, they will say, "I am no prophet. I am a man who tills the soil, for the land has been my living since I was a boy",

and in Psalm 74:9:

We do not see our emblems; *there is no longer any prophet*, and there is no one among us who knows how long it will last.

However, in spite of the view that prophecy was dead, there was an equally strong belief that at some point in the future prophecy would once again return. This return of prophecy was commonly expected to mark the dawning of a new age. Equally common was the belief that the prophet to mark the dawn of this new age would come as Elijah *redivivus*.<sup>843</sup> John the Baptist thus lived during a period of Jewish history rife with intense expectation of the imminent arrival of a prophet like Elijah who would be a forerunner for God. This prophet would usher in a new age. While in the New Testament tradition the belief grew that eventually saw the prophet like Elijah as a forerunner for Jesus (to whom is applied the predicate "messiah"), it may be that Luke has retained a tradition that regarded John the Baptist as the awaited prophet who would be the forerunner for God. This is indeed the role that the forerunner of Malachi 3:1-5 and 4:5-6 is envisaged as fulfilling.

We noted earlier that the early Christians regarded John as the eschatological prophet of Malachi 3:1-5 and 4:5-6. It was the Old Testament expectation that Elijah would prepare the way for God (Malachi 3:1), and that Elijah's role would be to purify the people in advance of Yahweh's coming in judgment:

<sup>843</sup> See also G.F. Moore, as quoted by C. Scobie: "it was the universal belief that shortly before the appearance of the Messiah, Elijah should return" (*John the Baptist*, 1964:125). There was, however, also another expectation that *Moses* would also return, in accordance with his saying in Deuteronomy 18:15-16, that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." There is as yet no known tradition that connects John the Baptist with the figure of *Moses redivivus*, but for an introductory discussion of a prophet like *Moses* in Jewish expectation see C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 121-123, or see M. Black, as quoted by Scobie: "there is reason to believe that one of the liveliest of popular Jewish expectations in the New Testament period was that of the coming of a prophet 'like unto Moses' (:123).

<i>Malachi 3:1-4</i>	<i>Malachi 4:5-6</i>
<p>See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For <i>he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.</i></p>	<p><i>Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.</i></p>

Because John's baptism was intended for repentance and purification (the forgiveness of sins), it is easy to see how Malachi 3:3-4 was applied to him. Testimony has also surfaced from Qumran regarding an expectation bearing witness to expectation centred on Elijah. Fragments from Cave 4 have the words "therefore I will send Elijah be[fore]" (4Q558).<sup>844</sup> Early Christianity thus evolved at a time, and in an environment in which there was a strong popular expectation of a prophet like Elijah. The early Christian application of this expectation to John the Baptist seemed to be a logical fulfillment of Malachi 3:1-5 and 4:5-6. Mark, for example, inserts into 1:2 a quotation from Malachi 3:1: "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way". Mark makes it clear that his own belief was already that John the Baptist was the returning Elijah prophesied by Malachi. In making this assertion, Mark puts the words neither in the mouth of Jesus, nor of John, nor indeed of any of the other characters in his narrative. Mark simply states his own personal conviction that the prophecies were fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. For Mark, therefore, that John was a prophet is a given that needs no further explanation. In addition to this, Mark has Jesus explicitly state that John the Baptist was Elijah:

[The disciples] asked [Jesus], "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? *But I tell you that Elijah has come* (*Ἡλίας ἐλήλυθεν*), and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him." (Mark 9:11-13)

<sup>844</sup> See J.E. Taylor for other sources bearing direct (or indirect) references to an expectation centred on Elijah, in Taylor's *The Immerser*, 284-288.

Mark is followed by Matthew in this prophetic identification of John with Elijah (Matthew 17:9-13).

Luke is another of the early Christian writers for whom it is evident that John the Baptist was not only a prophet, but the returned Elijah. A picture of John as the returned Elijah of Malachi 3:1-5 and 4:5-6 is presented in Luke 1: "[John] will go before [God] in the spirit and power of Elijah (καὶ αὐτὸς προελεύσεται ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει Ἡλίου)" (Luke 1:17). Unlike Mark in the first example, Luke does not place these words in the mouth of Jesus, but places the identification of John the Baptist with Elijah in the mouth of the angel and gives no indication that he himself thought differently. Luke merely states a personal conviction of his: John is the Elijah *redivivus* of Malachi 3 and 4.

Matthew is, in his turn, equally convinced that John is a prophet. Matthew has Jesus say about John the Baptist: "if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (αὐτός ἐστιν Ἡλίας ὁ μέλλων ἔρχεσθαι - Matthew 11:14).

Briefly, then, the traditions of the early Christian writers already attested that John the Baptist was indisputably a prophet and, to borrow a phrase from Luke and Matthew, "more than a prophet", for he was Elijah returned to life.

If the early Christian writers (and, according to them, Jesus also) viewed John as a prophet, was that in fact how John saw and understood himself? Did John the Baptist regard himself as a prophet, and not just any prophet, but specifically Elijah? Scholars are divided on this question. A. Schweitzer was of the opinion that John did *not* regard himself as Elijah returned. This connection, according to Schweitzer, was made by Jesus.<sup>845</sup> The Synoptic Gospels, continued Schweitzer, followed Jesus in casting John the Baptist as Elijah, while the Fourth Gospel, for Christological reasons, has John the Baptist deny even the attribution of a prophetic status, never mind any claim that he might be Elijah returned. C. Scobie, on the other hand, is of the persuasion that

<sup>845</sup> See A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 371-374.

John was aware of the expectation of the eschatological prophet who would immediately precede the new age. He believed that God had called him to this office...He believed that he had a decisive place in God's plan, that he stood on the threshold of the new age and indeed that he was ushering in the new age.<sup>846</sup>

In other words, John, according to Scobie, saw himself as not just a prophet in general terms, but as the eschatological prophet. Scholars have also drawn attention to the place of John's ministry (the wilderness – Luke 1:80; 3:2; Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:1), to his dress (Mark 1:6a; Matthew 3:4a), to his diet (Mark 1:6b; Matthew 3:4b), as well as to the content of his proclamation (Luke 3:7-14; Matthew 1:7-12) as leading to the “inescapable” conclusion that John “deliberately cast himself in the role of a prophet.”<sup>847</sup> Now, whether, and on what grounds, he specifically “cast himself” as Elijah *redivivus* is very difficult to establish.<sup>848</sup> But certainly it is not difficult to see how a combination of the elements noted above – namely the location of his ministry, his dress, his diet and the content and tone of his exhortation – led some Gospel writers and later Christian interpreters to believe he was the promised Elijah finally returned in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

The significance of the prophethood of John the Baptist for the author of Luke-Acts is also evident in the way in which our author has arranged the proclamation of John in Luke 3:7-14. We have here a genre of writing that has been referred to as a “prophetic judgment speech”. The prophetic judgment speech was characteristic of pre-exilic prophets. Jesus made a number of such speeches, notably at Luke 6:24-26; 10:13-15; 11:42, 52. John the Baptist, true to his prophetic calling and to the prophetic tradition also makes a judgment speech at Luke 3:7-14. The judgment speech has been noted by D.E. Aune to comprise four elements: an address by the prophet, an indictment, a transition, and a threat. Aune illustrates this<sup>849</sup> with the following example from Matthew 11:22 (Luke 10:13-15):

<sup>846</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 129-130.

<sup>847</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 130.

<sup>848</sup> It should be remembered that the Fourth Gospel completely divests John the Baptist of any prophetic mantle. John is presented in this Gospel as categorically and emphatically denying any claims whatsoever to prophethood: he was “neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet” (John 1:19-25).

<sup>849</sup> D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 179.



Address:	Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you Bethsaida!
Indictment:	for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.
Transition:	But I tell you,
Threat:	it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

It is possible to see how this schema of a prophetic judgment speech is employed to describe John's proclamation in Luke 3:7-14:

Address:	You brood of vipers!
Indictment:	Bear fruits that befit repentance... Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise. Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you. Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.
Transition:	For I tell you,
Threat:	God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham, even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree, every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

John's exhortation charges that there is complacency (deriving from the fact of having Abraham as a father – Luke 3:8). God is able to make short shrift of this, for God can quite easily make other children for Godself. John also charges that there is lack of conversion, or of deeds that denote a repentant spirit.

The placing of John's judgment at the beginning of the description of John's ministry is significant: it sets the tone of John's ministry. The basis for John's denunciation is the spirit of complacency that he sees as having gripped his fellow country people to the extent that there was no longer any conscience for basic social and neighbourly concern. John's prophetic denunciation of the 'children of Abraham' is based on the false security that has lulled the people of his time into believing that their salvation was assured simply on the basis of their ethnicity. John says the days are coming

when God will look elsewhere for a new people. John uses the symbolic language of 'these stones' (Luke 3:8) to transmit the idea of the ease with which God can look beyond Judaism. Indeed, John gives a foresight into the eventual inclusion of the Gentiles. In his speech John passes judgment on the people of his time, and he makes it clear, as did the prophets before him when condemning the people of their time, that they have been placed on the scales of judgment and they have been found wanting.

An important characteristic feature of prophetic judgment speeches that D.E. Aune unfortunately omits is the restorative or avoidance one or, simply, a solution out of a negative judgment that is offered by the prophets. It was not sufficient for the prophets to condemn the bad elements in individuals or in society at large; precisely in their negative judgment or condemnation lay the terms for restoration or salvation. This is a feature common with nearly all the Old Testament prophets. Amos, for example, after threatening his audience in blood-curdling details (Amos 2:13-16; 4:2-12) was nonetheless able to offer them a way out: "seek the Lord and live...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:6, 24). While John the Baptist threatens that the axe has already been laid to the roots of the trees to cut down the unfruitful ones to be thrown into the fire, he at the same time provides solutions for the avoidance of such a fate: bear fruits worthy of repentance, share material goods, keep clear of graft, desist from robbery and depriving others of their possessions (Luke 3:8-14). The basis for John's denunciation is the fact that all these things are not happening. Salvation lies in the inversion of the terms of the threat.

As we conclude this brief discussion on the prophethood of John the Baptist, it may be worthwhile to revisit briefly the issue of the subordination of John the Baptist to Jesus. At times the argument adduced for the perceived inferiority of John runs along the lines that, after all, John is only a *προφήτης ὑψίστου* ("a prophet of the Most High – Luke 1:76), whereas Jesus is called *μέγας καὶ... υἱὸς ὑψίστου* ("great and Son of the Most High" – Luke 1:32, 35). According to our own reading of these texts in their respective larger contexts, the designation "προφήτης" and "υἱὸς" are not meant as a reflection on the *quality* of John's and Jesus' relationship with God in terms of which of them had a 'better' relationship with God. John the Baptist and

Jesus fulfilled different roles in the *Heilsgeschichte*, and each is to be assessed not so much in qualitative relativity to the other, but within the scope and parameters of their function in the divine conception of salvation history. We have noted even Luke's own discomfort with the straitjacket imposed on John the Baptist by some early Christian traditions, and it therefore comes as no surprise that, from time to time, John appears in Luke's writings with individual characteristics, qualities and personality that, in an objective assessment and on the balance of the evidence would place him in a superior position to Jesus. After all, Jesus himself acknowledged (admittedly in a different context) that the disciple is not above his teacher (Luke 6:40).

### **15.5 Conclusion**

The aim of this study has been to show that John the Baptist is both integral as well as pivotal to Luke-Acts. One searches without success for the possibility that the story of Luke-Acts (the story of Jesus and the story of early Christianity) might be told without John the Baptist. Were one to excise John from the narrative, one would hardly conceive the story as Luke intended it to be heard and to be read. It is scarcely imaginable, in the context of Luke-Acts, that the story of both Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence and growth of the Christian movement could have been recounted without the central figure of John the Baptist. Jesus in Luke-Acts makes 'sense' in relation to John. Likewise, the origins of Christianity are understandable from the backdrop of John the Baptist. In Luke-Acts, therefore, John is more than just another character in the story. He holds the Lucan literary edifice together. From a theological perspective, John plays a crucial role in that he stands at a decisive point in the history of salvation. His importance lies in the fact that he bridged the old era and the new, linking the two epochs. From a literary point of view, John helps to hold Luke and Acts together. Apart from Jesus and Peter, John is the only other individual character who plays a significant role in both the Third Gospel and in Acts. In the Third Gospel he forms the backdrop from which Jesus and the history of salvation are to be understood; in Acts the 'Gospel' is clearly understood to have begun with John, hence his baptizing ministry is taken as the decisive moment from which to date apostleship or close union with Jesus.

What impression of John the Baptist did Luke wish to create for his readers? One thing is clear: Luke did not intend his readers to forget John the Baptist. John was

always to stand before Luke's readers as a constant presence that informed the reader's perspective throughout the narrative. John was the model for Luke's readers and hearers to emulate. We have noted how John is presented as a prophet as well as a witness. A true missionary, in Luke's mind is one who is like John the Baptist, that is to say one who points to the universal salvation of humanity, one who stands in the long line of prophets and points to the dawning of God's reign over humanity. According to Luke, by calling to mind John and his ministry, everything else would fall in place, whether in respect of the ministry of Jesus, or in relation to the mandate of Christianity as it is enunciated in Acts 1:8.

## 16. JOHN THE BAPTIST AS WITNESS IN LUKE-ACTS

### 16.1 *Witnessing in Luke-Acts*

The theme of witnessing is without doubt the most significant in Luke-Acts around which all others may be said to revolve. Indeed, the stated purpose of Luke-Acts is to offer reliable witness (ἀσφάλεια) for "the things which have been accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1). So concerned is the author of Luke-Acts about the reliability of his information that he undertakes to offer a well-researched, well-founded and well-ordered account of these "things accomplished among us". In so doing, our author hopes that the recipients of his account will come to "know the truth concerning the things" about which they have been informed (Luke 1:4). The author's quest for reliability is also evident in the way in which he relates his theological history to the secular history of his time.<sup>850</sup> Even though he is not always successful in this endeavour, the way in which he appeals to the objective and independent witness of the political structures and geographical history of his era clearly indicates that the author of Luke-Acts at least strives to set an objective standard by which the veracity of his account may be measured.

The single word μάρτυς occurs 15 times in Luke-Acts, 13 of which occur in Acts alone. What immediately strikes the reader is that μάρτυς, as a title, appears to be applied only to the Twelve and the small group of women with them (Acts 1:21-22). This would appear to give to the word the quality of *physical* witness; that is to say

<sup>850</sup> There are various correspondences between the theological history and the secular events or personages that the author of Luke-Acts offers. See, for example, Luke 2:1-5; 3:1-2; Acts 23:23-35; 25:1-5, 13-27).

that the word seems to be based on the criteria of having been present during the life, and at the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. As Peter never tired of reminding his audience:

we were witnesses to all [Jesus] did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:39-40. See also Acts 3:15, and Acts 5:32).

It is to be noted how the statement of witnessing is immediately followed by: "And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify" (Acts 10:41). Witnessing and commissioning are two sides of the same coin in Luke-Acts, and this becomes more and more evident especially in Acts. A witness cannot but be a missionary. Witnessing is at the heart of the commissioning of the resurrected Jesus. It is no wonder therefore, that these two movements (witnessing and commissioning) are prominent at both the close of the Third Gospel as well as at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. An example:

<i>Closing of Third Gospel</i>	<i>Opening of Acts</i>
<b>Luke 24:48</b> - "You are witnesses of these things (μάρτυρες τούτων). And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high (ἕως οὗ ἐνδύσηθε ἐξ ὕψους δύναμιν)."	<b>Acts 1:8</b> - "You shall be my witnesses (ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες) in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth".

For apostolic witness, the physical element remains very much to the fore. Thus for the one who is to assume the place of Judas in Acts 1:21-22 it is explicitly stated as a *sine qua non* that such a one should have

accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – μάρτυρα τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ σὺν ἡμῖν γενέσθαι ἓνα τούτων – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection".

With the broadening of the story in Acts, however, the reader begins to note an even greater stress on an actual physical witnessing to the life of Jesus. Whereas in the many sermons of the early Christians, especially in the early part of Acts, the word



μάρτυρες is very much in evidence, this is gradually replaced by the word αὐτόπται ("eye-witnesses"). This is evident in Acts 2:32; 3:15; 10:41; 13:31.

The word αὐτόπτης, has a profounder significance than μάρτυς in determining the authenticity of one's witness. According to Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*,<sup>851</sup> the word αὐτοπτέω means to "see with one's own eyes". An αὐτόπτης is thus one who sees for oneself, an "eyewitness". This connotes physical perception with the senses, while the verb μαρτυρέω means to "bear witness, give evidence...confirm" and does not, as such, necessitate direct personal and physical engagement with the data perceived. Witnessing is therefore not simply something one does with the assent of the mind, but it involves the person's entire being, body and mind. In other words, it calls for complete commitment to that which is being testified to. What is assented to by the intellect is set in motion by physical engagement. An eye-witness is, so to say, almost under a compulsion to bear witness.

### ***16.2 The Witness of John the Baptist***

John was driven by a sense of the impending judgment of God, to be soon visited upon the people of his time, and it was his (John's) calling in life, as it were, to save as many as possible through his exhortation to repentance (to be visibly shown by submission to his baptism for the forgiveness of sins). John's entire life was a life of witnessing to the people of his time. All the Gospels go out of their way, in their varying degrees, to portray John as the most immediate forerunner and witness for Jesus, if for a moment we place aside Luke's vacillations on this point. And just as New Testament witness in Luke-Acts is inseparable from mission, we see the same link in the witnessing and commissioning of John the Baptist. Luke 3:3-4 and Luke 7:27 provide an example:

<sup>851</sup> H.G. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990.

	<i>Luke 3:3-4</i>	<i>Luke 7:27</i>
<b><i>Witnessing</i></b>	"as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"	This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
<b><i>Mandate</i></b>	He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.	who will prepare your way before you."

It is to be noted that, in turn, Jesus always makes it a point to link witnessing and mission. For example, having called his disciples, he sent them out in twos to bear witness to him by preaching the Gospel and healing the sick (Luke 9:1-6, 10). There are the very same assurances Jesus had earlier given to John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-23), when John sent to him a deputation of two of his disciples with the question whether Jesus were the one to come, or whether they were to wait for another. Jesus' response to John's messengers on that occasion had been to underline the various ways in which both his followers and his deeds bore witness to him. Jesus introduced the list of deeds that bore witness to him by first giving the mandate: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

The author of Luke-Acts has thus succeeded in portraying John the Baptist as a witness and as a missionary, and as we go on into Acts, these are the same qualities with which Luke has not only endowed the witnesses and missionaries of the Gospel, but he posits them as an ongoing challenge for any authentic would-be follower of "The Way".

John the Baptist is both a prophet and a witness *ad intra*: to his own people. The Old Testament prophets are cited to show how John the Baptist is a chosen instrument of God for the salvation of his people, according to the long established tradition of the

scriptures and the prophets. But John is more than just a prophet and witness to his own people only; he is also a prophet and witness *ad extra*. John is a prophet and witness *ad gentes*, for his proclamation of salvation is not limited to the Jewish people only. As we have shown earlier, it is more than only Jews who flock to hear him speak in Luke 3:7-14, and it is not only to Jews that he offers words of advice as to how best to be not overtaken by God's impending judgment. Indeed, a number of the Old Testament prophets cited in relation to John were already known for the inclusiveness of the salvation that God had in store for all humanity. For example Isaiah 40:3-5, with whose prophecy John is associated at the beginning of his wilderness ministry in Luke 3:4-6, was already speaking of Yahweh's salvation extending to "all flesh". When John's birth is foretold by the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:5-17, one of the things prophesied about him is that, apart from turning many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God (witness *ad intra*), his task would also be "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (witness to the nations, witness *ad extra*).

Much has been written on the Lucan concept of witness. The study on the *Witness Mandate of the Risen Jesus in Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8: Its Theological and Juridical Implications* by P. Thayil<sup>852</sup> has much that is of beneficial interest and that is relevant to the theme of witnessing in Luke-Acts. Thayil provides a brief and helpful survey of some of the more significant authors on the subject of witnessing in Luke-Acts.<sup>853</sup> The authors he cites have noted that almost half of the 206 occurrences of the word μαρτυρία and its various cognates<sup>854</sup> in the New Testament occur in Luke-Acts alone, the other substantial number of μαρτυρία and its cognates being found in the Fourth Gospel. Thayil notes how Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8, in both of which the witness theme is prominent, "serve as a hinge between Luke's two volumes".<sup>855</sup> The mandate of the witnesses in Luke-Acts is to proclaim the risen Jesus as the Christ to the ends of the world, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 1:8). The starting point for this witness mandate is, over and over again stated as "beginning from the baptism of

<sup>852</sup> P. Thayil, *Witness Mandate of the Risen Jesus in Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8: Its Theological and Juridical Implications*, Roma, Tipographia Poliglotta della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993.

<sup>853</sup> See P. Thayil, *Witness Mandate of the Risen Jesus*, 1-6. See also P.G. Bolt, "Mission and Witness" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, 192 n.1; 193 n.8; 194 nn.15 and 16; 192-194.

<sup>854</sup> For example μάρτυς, μαρτύριον, μαρτυρεῖν, ἐπιμαρτύριον, συμμαρτυρεῖν, ψευδομαρτυρεῖν, διαμαρτύρεσθαι, and so on. See further P. Thayil, *Witness Mandate of the Risen Jesus*, 18-30.

<sup>855</sup> P. Thayil, *Witness Mandate of the Risen Jesus*, 31.

John" (Acts 1:22), or "after the baptism which John preaches" (Acts 10:37), or "[when] John was finishing his work" (Acts 13:25). For the author of Luke-Acts, it is clear that when one witnesses to Jesus the logical place and historical time to begin is with the start of the ministry of Jesus, but that ministry itself has its foundation in the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist. In other words therefore, the starting point for genuine witness to Jesus is with John the Baptist. He it is who gives the necessary perspective from which the ministry of Jesus is to be understood and, subsequently, borne witness to, and this, according to the author of Luke-Acts, is for various reasons. Uppermost among these is the perception by the author of Luke-Acts that John the Baptist is the quintessential witness to Jesus. Our author has closely linked the fates of John the Baptist and Jesus from even before their birth. John and Jesus are presented as kith and kin due to the supposed relationship that exists between their mothers (Luke 1:36).

Though Luke-Acts does not explicitly show John the Baptist as preparing the way specifically for Jesus, it is the common understanding within the Gospel (and indeed New Testament) traditions that John is the forerunner for Jesus, and is thus the first and most significant witness. In a sense, it is not even necessary for the author of Luke-Acts to prove that John the Baptist is the forerunner for Jesus. For our author this is either obvious or not in itself particularly significant. What is important is that Jesus' ministry builds upon that of John, and so to understand the Jesus event one must of necessity have John the Baptist as its starting point. By setting up the whole edifice of witnessing on the foundation laid by John the Baptist, the author of Luke-Acts sets John up as a paradigmatic witness. It is John that future witnesses are to emulate. John is thus the cornerstone for the proclamation of the good news, and for missionary activity in general. When the apostles gather to elect a replacement for Judas Iscariot, the principal qualification is that the candidate must have been "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become with us a witness" (Acts 1:21-22). John the Baptist thus stands at a decisive moment in the history of salvation as a primary point of reference for witnessing to the Jesus event.

It is striking that the witnessing is to start in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8, see also Luke 24:48), a place that, in fact, John the Baptist is not associated with, apart possibly from the very early years of his childhood. Jerusalem, however, is very significant in Luke-Acts. It is the place in which Jewish expectations of the messiah are most heightened. It is also to this expectation that John the Baptist addresses his message. John is thus also a witness to his age and to the expectations of his people. His message is directed towards ways in which to best prepare for, and fulfill the nation's hopes. John is thus closely associated with the hopes of Israel; the very hopes upon which Jesus in his turn builds his entire ministry. Jesus' proclamation of the good news (expressed by his characteristic "Kingdom of God") has John the Baptist as its founding witness (Luke 3:15). Mission and witness are integrally linked in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. It could be said that John is sent first to Israel through his ministry in the Judean wilderness, and to the Gentiles through the witness of his arrest and imprisonment and eventual death at Machaerus on the east side of the Jordan – away from the Israelite home ground of Judaea. John the Baptist died a witness to the ethical principles of Judaism in the territory of the Gentiles. His witness, like that of Peter and Paul and other Christian evangelizers after him, is not to Judaism only, but, in the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, "to the Jews first, but also to the Gentiles" (Romans 1:16). Thus the witness mandate of Acts 1:8 can be seen to apply, though retroactively, as much to John the Baptist as to the apostles and the later evangelizers of Acts. On separate grounds, John the Baptist could also perhaps be said to be a witness to Jesus if we accept the by no means conclusive tradition that John baptized Jesus. Matthew explicitly recounts a dialogue that takes place between John and Jesus prior to the latter's baptism by the former:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:3-15).

As a witness, therefore, John the Baptist is to be counted with the Twelve or thirteen<sup>856</sup> apostles, though in fact his stature is far greater than theirs, and the quality of his witness far superior to theirs, for John witnesses to a present reality (that is to say, to Jesus who actually lived in John's own time), while, apart from the apostles,

<sup>856</sup> See P.G. Bolt, who regards Paul as the thirteenth apostle "in no respect inferior to the twelve", "Mission and Witness" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 192.



the other witnesses (at least in Acts) bear witness to a historical person and to events, about which they have heard second hand. In other words, John the Baptist bears witness to a living contemporary, while (at least in Acts) the apostles and others bear witness to what is by then a memory.

John the Baptist is shown to be a witness not only in his life and work, but also in his persecution and death at the hands of Herod Antipas. During his ministry, Jesus forewarned his followers that faithful witnesses would generate trouble and persecution (Luke 6:22-23; 9:1-6; 10:1-16; 12:4-10; 12:12-19; 22:35-38). It is to be understood that the fate of John the Baptist (which Jesus was aware of – Matthew 14:12) and that of the prophets (Luke 6:23) provided for Jesus the background for his forewarning about persecution and even death in the carrying out of the witness mandate. Luke is, through the example of John the Baptist and the prophets in an earlier period, and of Paul and some of his companions in a not-too-distant past, encouraging his audience by in fact saying to them that “Trouble should not surprise or stop the witnesses because dominical prophecy, heavenly communication, and apostolic catechesis all herald its divine necessity”.<sup>857</sup>

In conclusion we can say that the author of Luke-Acts presents John the Baptist not just as one of the witnesses to the good news, but as the paradigmatic witness who, through his ministry and persecution sets the stage for all who come after him in response to the witness mandate of Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8.

## 17. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE PLAN OF GOD

### 17.1 *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*

In Luke-Acts, John's status and authority are established primarily with reference to God: the angel Gabriel prophesies that John “will be great before the Lord” (Luke 1:15), the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 is applied to John as one who “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76). According to Josephus, John “exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God”.<sup>858</sup> John himself proclaims that “God is able from these stones to raise up

<sup>857</sup> B. Rapske, “Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution” in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 255.

<sup>858</sup> *Ant.* xviii.116-119.

children to Abraham" (Luke 3:8). And, of course, there is the belief stated in all the Gospels and other early Christian writings that John was a prophet of God. In Luke-Acts, however, it is this same God who has a plan for the salvation of all humanity, John the Baptist is shown to be a key instrument in this plan of God.

It has been noted by some scholars<sup>859</sup> how the plan of God is one of the overarching themes (indeed, for some it is the "primary theme"<sup>860</sup>) of Luke-Acts. J.T. Squires notes how this "distinctively Lukan theme" of the plan of God "undergirds the whole of Luke-Acts".<sup>861</sup> S. Cunningham in his turn affirms that "The providence of God is certainly a central theme in Luke-Acts. God is the primary actor in Luke-Acts and his actions form the basis of salvation-history."<sup>862</sup> D.L. Tiede remarks that "Perhaps no New Testament author is more concerned than Luke to testify to the accomplishment of the will of God in history or is so caught up in the language of the divine plan and predetermined intention, purpose, and necessity."<sup>863</sup> In other words, all that happens in Luke-Acts unfolds according to a set design of God. The concrete realization of the divine plan stands indeed as one of the pillars of Luke-Acts, and John is certainly to be understood from this perspective (among others) and purposes of Luke-Acts.

### 17.2 The Salvific Plan of God in History

Through a close analysis of words and phrases like ἡ βουλή τοῦ θεοῦ,<sup>864</sup> πεπληροφορημένων,<sup>865</sup> δεῖ,<sup>866</sup> as well as the study of such motifs as persecution,<sup>867</sup>

<sup>859</sup> See, among others, J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*; H.J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, London, Black, 1927; S. Schulz, "Gottes Vorsehung bei Lukas", *ZNW* 54 (1963) 104-116; H. Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (142-146); J. Navone, "The Way of the Lord", *Scripture* 20 (1968) 24-30; J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 179-181; R.F. O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology*; E. Richard, "The Divine Purpose: The Jews and the Gentile Mission (Acts 15)" in C.H. Talbert (ed.), *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, 188-209; W. Grundmann, "δεῖ", *TDNT* 2 (1964) 21-25; H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (131-157); D.L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*; C.H. Cosgrove, "The Divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts", *NovT* 26 (1984) 168-190; G. Segalla, "Gesù rivelatore della volontà del Padre nella Tradizione Sinnotica", *Rivista biblica italiana* 14 (1966) 467-508; C.L. Mitton, "The Will of God in the Synoptic Tradition of the Words of Jesus", *ExpTim* 72 (1960-1961), 68-71.

<sup>860</sup> See J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 2.

<sup>861</sup> J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 1.

<sup>862</sup> S. Cunningham, *'Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 296.

<sup>863</sup> D.L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*, 33.

<sup>864</sup> J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 1-2.

<sup>865</sup> D. Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation of God's Promises" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 44.

mission and witness,<sup>868</sup> prophecy,<sup>869</sup> or what J.T. Squires collectively calls "divine plan language",<sup>870</sup> scholars have shown that, apart from the fact that the plan of God and divine providence can be seen in the life and work of key individuals in the narrative of Luke-Acts (a point we will follow up on shortly in relation to John the Baptist), the main events in Luke-Acts proceed in accord with divine strategy, and that while this strategy may be "new in execution" in the unfolding events of Luke-Acts, it is actually "old in planning",<sup>871</sup> in that it can be traced back to the Old Testament prophets. In other words, behind Luke-Acts stands God and his plan. In the words of B. Rapske, "Resisting the plan of God cannot be successful, only painful; and in the end, God's will prevails."<sup>872</sup> Rapske is referring to the 'success' of Christianity despite the many odds it faced, and specifically to Saul's earlier (but futile) attempts at squashing the nascent movement. For the author of Luke-Acts, the conviction is strong that behind the "things which have been accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1) stands the invincible cosmic and universal plan of God. To echo Rapske:

Out of the record of the Christian witness' spread in a climate of deep and often violent hostility, Luke must demonstrate that 'the Way' was, and is, the plan of God. From official Jewish theological reflection upon Christian witness Luke draws the principle that if it is of God, it will be invincible<sup>873</sup>

R.E. Brown relates the overall plan of God to a theme of Luke's that is developed particularly in Acts, namely the mission to the Gentiles. According to Brown,

For Luke, the mission to the Gentiles was no aberration nor a desperate alternative for the mission to Israel. Rather it had been God's plan from the beginning that Jesus should be both a revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel (2:32).<sup>874</sup>

<sup>866</sup> C.H. Cosgrove, "The Divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts", *NovT* 26 (1984) 168-190; W. Grundmann, "δεν", *TDNT* 2 (1964) 21-25. See also L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 15-16.

<sup>867</sup> B. Rapske, "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 235-256, especially 245-256.

<sup>868</sup> P.B. Bolt, "Mission and Witness" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 191-214. See also B. Rapske, "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution", 237, 240, 245-256.

<sup>869</sup> J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 121-154.

<sup>870</sup> See Squires' article "The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel*, 38; see also 39.

<sup>871</sup> So also D. Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation of God's Promises", 45.

<sup>872</sup> B. Rapske, "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution", 239.

<sup>873</sup> B. Rapske, "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution", 254.

<sup>874</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 236.

### 17.3 *The Place of John the Baptist's Ministry in the Plan of God*

Where John the Baptist fits into this universal plan of God is clear: he is the hinge that connects two periods in the history of salvation. As we noted earlier, H. Conzelmann envisioned three periods in the history of salvation: the age of the prophets, the age of Jesus, and the period of the church. John the Baptist is a decisive figure between the old dispensation (that of the prophets – “The law and the prophets were until John” [Luke 16:16a]) and the new (that is, if we conflate the age of Jesus and that of the church into a continuous one – “since [John came] the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” [Luke 16:16b]). John the Baptist initiates the preaching of the kingdom of God. It is John the Baptist who caps one period of the history of salvation, while initiating another. It was the plan of God, expressed by the prophets, that through repentance Israel should be saved;<sup>875</sup> and it still remains God’s plan that through John’s baptism of repentance, the new Israel should save itself from the impending judgment. J.A. Darr describes John’s “strategic role in the unfolding divine plan” in the following terms:

John represents the vital but extremely tricky dialectic of continuity and discontinuity between the eras in salvation history. John is like a sign that marks both the end of the old and the beginning of the new; but he is also the means by which old and new are integrally related.<sup>876</sup>

We noted above that scholars like J.T. Squires, B. Rapske, D. Bock and others have shown that the plan of God for the salvation of all humanity can be seen in the life and work of key individuals in Luke-Acts. That John the Baptist is one such individual in Luke-Acts is a point that the present writer has consistently upheld. To paraphrase H. Conzelmann, John straddles two periods in the history of salvation: the age of the prophets (which John closes), and the age of Jesus (which John inaugurates). Now, however, the least in the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim is greater than the man who was the greatest in the preceding era (Luke 7:28). In the words of C. Scobie,

John was a supremely great man, but he did belong to the old dispensation. Now that the Kingdom has come, those in it, i.e. Jesus’ disciples, are ‘greater’ than John.

<sup>875</sup> See, for example, the prophets’ incessant plea for Israel to repent: “Repent...!” (Ezekiel 14:6; 18:18:30), and compare this with John’s exhortation to his hearers to “Bear fruits that befit repentance...He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none...he who has food, let him do likewise...Collect no more than is appointed you...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation...” (Luke 3:8-14). See also the similar exhortation by Peter in Acts 2:38; 3:19

<sup>876</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 79-80.

'They are greater, not in their moral character or achievements, but in their privileges.'<sup>877</sup>

John the Baptist, as the forerunner that the prophet Malachi promised, is part of a divine plan whose roots go back to the Old Testament hope (Luke 1:14-17, 7:27). It is a characteristic of Luke-Acts that he uses prophecy and fulfillment as a demonstration of divine providence.<sup>878</sup> John the Baptist fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5) and Malachi (Malachi 3:1), by which he is shown by the author of Luke-Acts to be fulfilling the plan of God. According to the prophecy of Zechariah his father, John is said to be the one who

προπορεύσει γὰρ ἐνώπιον κυρίου ἑτοιμάσαι ὁδοὺς αὐτοῦ, τοῦ δοῦναι γνῶσιν σωτηρίας τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀφέσει ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν, διὰ σπλάγχνα ἐλέους θεοῦ ἡμῶν<sup>879</sup> (will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God – Luke 1:76-78).

John shall thus be the immediate predecessor of God as God goes about the pre-determined plan for saving all of humanity. John is the ἄγγελος (messenger) that, in a manner almost reminiscent of that of Gabriel in Luke 1:11-20 and Luke 1:26-38, is sent ahead by God to proclaim the impending action of God on behalf of his people.

John thus plays a role that is essential to the fulfillment of God's plan for the salvation of all. John's ministry and proclamation open the way to the Jesus event, which in turn opens the way to the witness and ministry of the believers who form the foundation of the Christian community. The witnessing of the believers in Acts is a

<sup>877</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 78.

<sup>878</sup> So also L.T. Johnson (*The Gospel of Luke*) who places Luke's literary device of proof from prophecy within the broader context of early Christian apologetic, where "proof from prophecy was a standard element". Johnson notes how Luke generally "extends and refines proof from prophecy by making it his most important literary device" (15-16). Note also Johnson's distinction in Luke's usage between literary prophecy, programmatic prophecy, and speech-narrative prophecy.

<sup>879</sup> All the italics in this text, stressing the personal pronoun αὐτός (in this text in the form of genitive αὐτοῦ, as well as in the possessive pronoun θεοῦ ἡμῶν and the genitive κυριοῦ) as referring to God and none other, are ours. Clearly Isaiah, and Luke after him, anticipated a precursor for τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν and no other earthly, prophetic or quasi-prophetic figure. In this very early shift in the application of this text from God to Jesus there already lies an early indication of the John-Jesus polemic that had already taken root in early Christianity, and which had already practically sealed John's fate as forever cast in an inferior mode in relation to Jesus in the plan of salvation. We have noted elsewhere the need for an ongoing and detailed revisitation of this theological presupposition, an analytical process hopefully to be informed more by the textual and historical sources and the data therein than by purely theological or denominational biases, as it has hitherto all too frequently tended to be the case.



continuation of the witnessing to Jesus initially set in motion by John. John the Baptist and his mission are very much a part of the plan of God since he bridges two eras that both depend on divine assistance. John the Baptist is the hinge that connects the era of the prophets of old and the era of Jesus and the Christian community.

In the prophetic age which John brings to a close, it was the plan of God to keep the promise of salvation alive through the covenants with the patriarchs and through the proclamation of the prophets. Now, in the new dispensation, it is the plan of God through the proclamation of John (and, in Luke's theology, those like him) to inaugurate the era of the fulfillment of the promises of the prophets. If it is the plan of God that all nations be saved, the role of John the Baptist in this plan becomes even more evident when his statement that "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Luke 3:8) is taken into consideration. John is already saying to his largely Jewish audience that they have one direction to look for the new understanding of their own identity: no longer to their exclusive patriarchal history alone, but also to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Therein, according to the plan of God attested to by the prophets and to which John the Baptist is a faithful servant,<sup>880</sup> lies the new people of God. In other words, John tells his audience that the days are over when appeal to having Abraham as their father was sufficient to secure salvation for the Jewish people, and his audience had better understand this for it is already late in the day: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Luke 3:9). In other words, God's plan for the salvation of all is already under way – it is already in motion even as John speaks, and the chief agent of the period of transition from particularism to universalism is none other than John himself. Jesus, as we will see, will continue with the work of John the Baptist. John proclaims his message to the multitudes, to the tax collectors, and to the soldiers as a preview to the inclusive ministries of Peter (Acts 10-11), Paul (Acts 13-28), and the other missionaries in Acts. Whatever the achievements of the evangelizers in the missionary arena, they are already foreshadowed in the ministry of John. The Holy Spirit, who is without doubt the chief agent of mission in Acts,<sup>881</sup> has already been identified for this major role by

<sup>880</sup> So also C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 129-130, 161-162.

<sup>881</sup> See L.T. Johnson's observation that "Acts can appropriately be called 'The Book of the Holy Spirit'. The Spirit actively intervenes in the story, impelling and guiding it (cf. Acts 8:29, 39; 10:19; 11:15; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 20:23). Indeed, Luke includes five separate accounts of the Spirit's 'dramatic outpouring' on believers (2:1-4; 4:28-31; 8:15-17; 10:44; 19:6). For Luke, all Christians manifestly

John the Baptist: the baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire foretold by John in Luke 3:16 is what 'fires' the witnesses in Acts. Thus, then, is John's place established in the plan of God. John the Baptist has a unique role in the divine plan, whether it be in relation to Jesus, or to the witnesses in Acts who begin to make this plan of the salvation of all humanity a reality.

Not a few scholars have noted how the plan of God in Luke-Acts extends to and includes suffering and persecution, which is another theme of some prominence in Luke-Acts,<sup>882</sup> and which the author also uses for theological purposes. S. Cunningham<sup>883</sup> has put together a helpful review of scholars who have made various contributions bearing on the topic of persecution in Luke-Acts. Cunningham asserts that "Luke employs the theme of persecution as a means of accomplishing his theological agenda",<sup>884</sup> and that "Persecution is part of the plan of God".<sup>885</sup> He arrives at this conclusion after studying the use of the "theological passive" in Luke-Acts, especially as evidenced in the use of such terms as *κεῖται* (*appointed* – Luke 2:34), *δεῖ* (*it is necessary* – Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44, 46), *δεῖ παθεῖν* (*it is necessary to suffer* – Acts 9:16; 14:22), *παραδίδοσθαι* (*handed over* – Luke 9:44), *τελειοῦμαι* (*brought to completion* – Luke 13:32), *τελεσθήσεται* (*will be accomplished* – Luke 18:31), *ῥιζοσπασμένον* (*as it has been determined* – Luke 22:22), and the phrase *τῇ ῥιζοσπασμένῃ βουλῇ καὶ προγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ*, by which Peter declares that the crucifixion of Jesus happened "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).<sup>886</sup>

Persecution is not only a physical experience, but a psychological emotion as well, such as persecution through the experience of rejection. In Luke 7:30, the Pharisees and the lawyers are described as those who reject the very purpose of God by rejecting John's baptism. Likewise, Acts 5:39 makes it clear that to oppose Jesus'

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'have' the Holy Spirit" (*The Gospel of Luke*, 17). See in general Johnson's treatment of this theme on pages 17-18. Note also M. Turner's assertion that "for Luke, the Spirit is largely the 'Spirit of prophecy'; in Acts especially as an 'empowering for witnesses'." See Turner's "The 'Spirit of Prophecy' as the Power of Israel's Restoration and Witness" in I.H. Marshall & D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, 330.

<sup>882</sup> See the convincing study by S. Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations'.

<sup>883</sup> See S. Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations', 24-41.

<sup>884</sup> S. Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations', 295.

<sup>885</sup> S. Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations', 337.

<sup>886</sup> See further S. Cunningham, 'Through Many Tribulations', 296-301.

followers is to be an enemy of God. In the same vein, the persecution of the prophets and the killing of Jesus and of Stephen are said in Acts 7:51 to be the actions of "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears", who resist the Holy Spirit (and thus God). If, then, persecution is the lot of those who, by divine foreknowledge, are witnesses to God's plan of salvation for all humanity, the reader is not surprised that John the Baptist must also suffer the same fate. If death itself is the extreme form of persecution, or the result thereof, it is not surprising that John the Baptist offers the ultimate sacrifice (Luke 9:7-9), for persecution is "in fact, the response to be expected to the proclamation of salvation, just as it was the common experience of God's prophets of old".<sup>887</sup>

In concluding his study on the role of suffering and persecution in Luke-Acts, S. Cunningham concludes that

While an apparent majority of Lukan scholars follow Käsemann in emphasizing Luke's *theology of glory*, [we offer] support to a position that gives equal status to a *theology of the cross*. By this [is meant] that Luke attaches positive significance to suffering itself.<sup>888</sup>

Thus, the plan of God triumphs even through, or in spite of "many tribulations" (Acts 14:22), and John the Baptist is, even in this too, cast in the role of a paradigmatic character: genuine witnesses in Luke-Acts must expect suffering as a constitutive element of their lives, for it is "through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The question that Cunningham poses at the end of his study draws as much upon the experiences of John the Baptist, Jesus, the evangelizers in Acts, Luke's audience, as it does upon the experiences of contemporary missionary endeavours: "To what extent is the absence of persecution an indication of the shallowness of discipleship?"<sup>889</sup> Luke emphasizes the cost of discipleship, which for him includes even the willingness to lose one's own life for the sake of the Kingdom. This is heightened in Luke 14:26, which belongs to the special Lucan material not found in Mark or Q: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he

<sup>887</sup> S. Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 335. See also 337.

<sup>888</sup> S. Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 339.

<sup>889</sup> S. Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 342.

cannot be my disciple". John the Baptist does indeed meet the qualifications for discipleship.

## 18. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS IN LUKE-ACTS

### 18.1 Introduction

We noted earlier that scholars have, with very few exceptions, been consistent in their condemnation of H. Conzelmann for his light dismissal of Luke 1-2, and his exclusion of these chapters from his schema of a three-tiered *Heilsgeschichte*. Conzelmann was of the position that Luke 1-2 are irrelevant in his periodization into three epochs of the history of salvation. For R.E. Brown, Luke 1-2 is so significant for the rest of the Gospel that it is inconceivable for any analysis of Lucan theology to neglect it.<sup>890</sup> Given the significance of the first two chapters of the Third Gospel, many scholars agree that "Luke arranged these chapters with careful artistry", even though they are not agreed as to the precise nature of this art or this "artistry and delicacy".<sup>891</sup> What is clear, however, is that right from the start of the Third Gospel Luke intended to display parallels between John the Baptist and Jesus, with the closest such parallelism evident in the two annunciations (Luke 1:5-23, for John, and Luke 1:26-38, for Jesus). Brown has arranged these parallelisms in a way that is quite helpful.<sup>892</sup> The schema that follows builds upon what he sees as "a Lucan feature".<sup>893</sup> While our format differs somewhat from that of Brown, the concept is nonetheless developed along the lines of his arrangement of the examples cited.

<sup>890</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 241-243.

<sup>891</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 253.

<sup>892</sup> For other parallelisms, see R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 250-253. See also on pages 248-249; 294-295; 297; 409.

<sup>893</sup> See R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 250, n.44.

EVENT	JOHN THE BAPTIST	JESUS
Both in the wilderness	<i>Luke 3:2</i> The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness	<i>Luke 4:1</i> And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness
Isaian texts applied to both	<i>Luke 3:4-6</i> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord..."	<i>Luke 4:17-19</i> And there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah...
Both issued warnings drawn from the Old Testament	<i>Luke 3:7-9</i> He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers..."	<i>Luke 4:24-27</i> And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country..."
Both are questioned about their identity	<i>Luke 3:15</i> All questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ...	<i>Luke 4:34</i> "I know who you are, the Holy One of God".....
Both preached the good news	<i>Luke 3:18</i> So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.	<i>Luke 4:43</i> But he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God..."

To Brown's schema we may also add the following evident parallelisms:

Both have a fatal encounter with Herod Antipas	<i>Luke 9:7-9</i> Herod said, "John I beheaded..."	<i>Luke 23:6-12</i> [Before Jesus is condemned to death] When Herod saw Jesus he was very glad...
Both had disciples	<i>Luke 5:33-35</i> And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers..."  <i>Luke 11:1</i> "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." <sup>894</sup>	<i>Luke 6:12-16</i> And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles....

### 18.2 John the Baptist, Jesus and the "Criterion of Embarrassment"

In discussing the question of the relationship between John and Jesus it is important to distinguish between John the Baptist as portrayed by the author of Luke-Acts (the John the Baptist, in other words, who is the subject of our study) and John the Baptist of history. A reconstruction of the historical John the Baptist is outside the scope of the present study; however the following insights drawn from some of the scholars who have attempted a study of the historical John the Baptist may help us to look at the relationship between John and Jesus from a different perspective. We have noted

<sup>894</sup> See other references to John's disciples at Mark 2:18; 6:28; Matthew 9:14; 11:2; 14:12; Luke 5:33; 7:18; 11:1; John 1:22, 32, 35, 37; 3:25, 27. Having disciples, John would have also been a teacher. In Luke 3:12 John the Baptist is addressed as "teacher" (διδάσκαλε). This role of John as teacher has completely been erased by the New Testament writers. Only Luke has allowed this tradition to continue, though very briefly. Notice how in Mark 10:18 (see also at Luke 18:19 and at Matthew 19:17) Jesus snaps at the man who calls him "Good teacher". Jesus takes umbrage at being described as "good", and not at being called "teacher"



above how some scholars are of the view that the relationship between John and Jesus was a matter of no small discomfort for the early Christians.<sup>895</sup> M. Grant, for example, has noted how the presentation of Jesus as having – certainly in Mark and Matthew, or perhaps may have in Luke<sup>896</sup> – been baptized by John<sup>897</sup>

set the theologians of subsequent centuries a conundrum. For how could Jesus have been baptized for the forgiveness of his own sins, when according to the Christology which developed after his death, he was divine and therefore sinless?<sup>898</sup>

J.P. Meier suggests the “criterion of embarrassment” as a point of departure from which to study the vexed question of the relationship between John and Jesus. By “criterion of embarrassment” Meier means the “actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church”. Meier gives as a “prime example” the

baptism of the supposedly superior and sinless Jesus by his supposed inferior, John the Baptist, who proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” [The event is recounted] with no theological explanation as to why the superior sinless one submits to a baptism meant for sinners...Quite plainly, the early Church was “stuck with” an event in Jesus’ life that it found increasingly embarrassing, that it tried to explain away by various means, and that John the Evangelist finally erased from his Gospel. It is highly unlikely that the Church went out of its way to create the cause of its own embarrassment.<sup>899</sup>

Or, in the words of J.E. Taylor,

there was an awkward awareness in the early Church that John’s baptism had something to do with the remission of sins; so, if Jesus was baptized, did that mean he needed to have his sins remitted? In view of this difficulty, Jesus’ baptism by John has come to be understood as one of the key problems that the early Church needed to “explain” in the Gospels. It was this problem that gave rise to the apologetic modifications of the Baptist story. No one could have invented something so painfully hard to justify.<sup>900</sup>

<sup>895</sup> See, among others, C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 142; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 88; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 60; M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung*, 143.

<sup>896</sup> Even R. Bultmann, who was wary (indeed quite skeptical) of the historical reliability of the Gospel material in general, accepted that Jesus must have been baptized by John. See Bultmann’s *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 47.

<sup>897</sup> This, for E. Sanders, represents one of the surest facts we know about Jesus. See Sanders’ *Jesus and Judaism*, 11, and his *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 92-94.

<sup>898</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 49.

<sup>899</sup> J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, 168-169.

<sup>900</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 5. See also W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 107, and C.H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, 161-163.

The writers of the Gospels are thus seen to have been largely “engaged in an extensive damage control as regards Jesus’ relationship with John”.<sup>901</sup> For example, it is to be noted how, on the basis of the rather unfavourable media that John the Baptist gets from the Gospel writers,<sup>902</sup> it appears to many Christian scholars that John’s God is an angry, vengeful judge, while Jesus is seen as preaching God as a loving father. This dichotomy was very much at the service of deep-seated early Christian conceptions of the nature of the Old Testament God (= the God of John the Baptist), which the New Testament God (= the God of Jesus) supercedes. Thus was the subordination of John the Baptist complete. In all ways, John was seen to be no match for Jesus.

But John the Baptist as portrayed by the author of Luke-Acts is rather different. Firstly, John lived during the period of a very fractious as well as a highly apocalypticized Judaism. In this apocalyptic milieu of Jewish history, doom and salvation were necessarily counter-balanced: the belief was rife that God would destroy the wicked in a conflagration of flames, while the righteous would be admitted (resurrected) into a life of happiness. In the coming action of God, some would be saved, and others would be damned. John speaks of “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (in other words, there will, at the coming judgment of God, be destruction for *some* - πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν – Luke 3:9), John also speaks of salvation for others, and he clearly enunciates what those others must do in order to attain that salvation: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise...Collect no more than is appointed you...Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:11-14).

In any case, Jesus’ God is not always as gracious or as benevolent as the scholars who see a dichotomy between John’s God and Jesus’ God would have us believe. After all, does Jesus not speak of the separation of sheep from goats at the final judgment –

<sup>901</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 7.

<sup>902</sup> See J.E. Taylor (*The Immerser*), “John can come across in the literature as one-dimensional and severe. He is not allowed to show much compassion...This presentation is, of course, extremely limiting and gives us no real indication of the historical John; yet the ancient Christian view of John continues to influence how he is seen today” (:7).

with the former destined for salvation, and the latter for eternal punishment (Matthew 25:31-46)? And does Jesus also not speak of a judgment by God at which there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for those not admitted into the kingdom of God, while for those admitted there will be joy at seeing Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets (Luke 13:22-30)? Indeed, then, Jesus' God is no more and no less loving, no more and no less severe than is the God proclaimed by John the Baptist in Luke-Acts.

Secondly, "In the eschatological schema shared by John and Jesus, God metes out punishment for the wicked and reward for the righteous; the one does not exist without the other".<sup>903</sup>

To return to the matter of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus: That there was an "embarrassment" for the earliest Christians about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus has been spoken of often enough by different scholars. However, all the implications of this "embarrassment" have not yet been teased out, and what, really, was for the earliest Christians so potentially (and actually) damaging in this relationship has not been fully explored yet. It may well be that some day the 'Questers' of the historical John or the historical Jesus might yield insights that may yet greatly challenge some of our received traditions and perceptions.

For now, however, what is quite striking in this whole discussion on the relationship between John and Jesus is the interesting fact that there is actually very little direct and personal contact between them.<sup>904</sup> Jesus only goes to John to be baptized (so Mark and Matthew and, presumably, Luke), after which (so Mark, Matthew, and Luke) the two go their separate ways, never to meet again except indirectly when John, in prison, sends two of his disciples to ask of Jesus whether he might be the 'coming one' (Luke 7:18-23).

<sup>903</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 7.

<sup>904</sup> Scholars have generally noted in this regard how E. Haenchen's unnuanced view that John the Baptist and Jesus never met at all has failed to convince. See his argument in *Der Weg Jesu: Eine Erklärung des Markus-Evangeliums und der kanonischen Parallelen*, 60-63. See also M.S. Enslin's "John and Jesus", *ZNW* (1975), 1-18. R.L. Webb has more convincingly argued *contra* Haenchen and Enslin in "John the Baptist and his Relationship to Jesus" in B.D. Chilton & C.A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 179-299, especially 214-299.

In the context of Luke's account of John's baptizing activity, however, John's question ("Are you he who is to come?") does make sense, for in the matter of the baptism of Jesus there is no clear statement from our author that John administered the ritual. While Mark (1:9) and Matthew (3:13-15) state explicitly that Jesus was baptized by John, in Luke Jesus' entry on the baptism scene is very abrupt; Jesus is mentioned on the fly, in mid-sentence: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." (Luke 3:21). Luke never really tells us who baptized Jesus. What we get from Luke's account is, at best, an inference, that Jesus probably was baptized by John. We would not, however, go so far as to maintain, as C.G. Müller has done, that "Bei der Taufe Jesu spielte [Johannes des Täufers] keine besondere Rolle."<sup>905</sup> When Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus is read in the light and context of Luke 3:7-14 (which speaks of "multitudes that came to be baptized"), it is very likely that Jesus would have been but one more face in the crowd, and that therefore John would not have been able to specifically distinguish him from among the crowds milling around him. In other words, the story line in Luke-Acts has, thus far, not provided any reason why John should not ask the question.

The relationship between John and Jesus in their adulthood has been a problem since the earliest years of Christianity because of the two perceptions that emerge from the relationship between the two protagonists: firstly, Jesus' being baptized by John, an action that may have indicated that Jesus was subordinate to John and, secondly, the fact that Jesus was baptized at all, since John's baptism was "a baptism for the forgiveness of sins". Was Jesus then a sinner too? Quite early on in his Gospel, Matthew seeks to set the record straight. His account of the scene at Jesus' baptism runs thus:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. (Matthew 3:13-15).

The Fourth Gospel takes the easy way out of this conundrum by simply obliterating even the slightest hint of any possibility that John might even remotely be considered as superior (or even only equal) to Jesus:

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<sup>905</sup> C.G. Müller, *Mehr als ein Prophet*, 249.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" *He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."* And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1:19-23)

Luke goes about the matter more circumspectly. The imprisonment of John by Herod is strategically placed in the narrative in such a way that John is removed from centre stage before Jesus' ministry begins. However, this in itself is not a statement about superiority or inferiority: Luke has one of his significant characters give way to another of his significant characters on the stage. This is a smart way of avoiding depicting John as in any way superior or equal to Jesus. J.A. Darr has aptly shown the significance of Luke 3:19-20:

The Herod passage is crucial, therefore, to guiding characterization of John in relation to Jesus – a process that will not conclude until Acts 19. Already the reader is beginning to construe an image of John as reformer but not inaugurator, a forerunner but not a herald, a preparer but not a witness, a prophet but not a proclaimer of the advent of God's kingdom.<sup>906</sup>

The discomfort experienced in grappling with the question of the relationship between John and Jesus is not found in the canonical Gospels only. In the *Gospel of the Ebionites* 4 it is recounted how, on being asked by his mother and brothers to go to John and submit himself to his baptism, an apparently irritable Jesus cuttingly responds: "And wherein have I sinned, that I should be baptized?"

Whatever the comparative and/or qualitative relationship between these two protagonists of Luke-Acts, it seems clear that Jesus, in any case, accepted as true John's proclamations and predictions of an imminent eschatological 'End'. By submitting to the baptism preached and practised by John – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – Jesus identified himself with those of his time who had not fulfilled the requirements of the Law: "With a repentant heart, he turned from his past ways and committed himself to walking along the way of righteousness in accordance with John's teaching."<sup>907</sup> The *intention* (at least in Luke-Acts) behind

<sup>906</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 74-75.

<sup>907</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 263.



Jesus' decision to join the throngs in receiving (John's) baptism as a sign of their repentance must, in the current state of research, remain the subject of much fruitless speculation – fruitless because it does not appear to have been a question for the author of Luke-Acts

Be that as it may, and uncomfortable as John's relationship to Jesus may have been to the early Christians, it is still possible to put together a profile of how the two men are related to each other in Luke-Acts. The beginning for such a project is obviously the birth narratives. It is here that the reader of Luke-Acts has an initial, though indirect (*in utero*), encounter with the two protagonists, just as the stage is here set for their own equally indirect but nonetheless significant contact with each other. The initial encounter, if we may call it that, takes place on the occasion of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. Luke recounts how Elizabeth, in her joy at seeing her kinswoman, exclaims:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. (Luke 1:42-44).

Clearly, the author of Luke-Acts uses the birth narratives not only as an introduction to his *corpus*, but as the occasion for bringing together the two most significant people in the story he is about to tell. Henceforth the stage has been set for the brief but intense future encounter between John and Jesus. From here on, their fates are interlinked, and it becomes almost impossible to think of the one without connecting him with the other. While H. Conzelmann believed that the birth narratives (Luke 1 and 2) have little (in fact no) relevance to the rest of Luke-Acts, this is a position that is difficult to sustain. The author of Luke-Acts consciously and deliberately introduces the reader to the two major characters who will carry the story from here onwards. John has a pivotal role for any who wish to understand the ministry of Jesus; and for any who wish to cultivate a close appreciation for the fundamental outlines of Jesus' practical theology it is indispensable to trace those roots to the proclamation of John the Baptist. From earliest Christianity it has been held that Jesus' ministry began with the mission of John. It is here that any study of Jesus' ministry rightly begins for, as J.L. Price has correctly observed, "Historians must

adopt this point of departure, for, in the preaching and baptism of John, Jesus received his first impulse to public action."<sup>908</sup>

It may be worthwhile to review once again the elements of John's proclamation, for the mind of John may be best seen in what he says, rather than in what is said about him by others, though that too may yield valuable insights into the relationship between John and Jesus. After an introduction to John's ministry that recalls the vocation of Old Testament prophets (Luke 3:1-3), Luke recounts the ministry of John in the following manner:

[John] said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:7-14).

From this it is possible to identify areas of confluence between the ministry of John and that of Jesus, but also points of marked divergence. It is possible that it is especially in the latter that the nature of the relationship between John and Jesus may begin to emerge in its basic elements. It is possible that it is perhaps in the stark divergences between John and Jesus that we may find the basic outlines of what the author of Luke-Acts seeks to highlight about John.

Though the earliest Christian tradition is clearly uneasy with the idea of John baptizing Jesus because it seems to make John superior and to cast Jesus as a sinner, the same tradition is unanimous in depicting the ministry of Jesus as beginning with John the Baptist. Indeed, this fact becomes so important in Acts that witness to the earliest beginnings of Jesus' ministry in John's proclamation becomes the main qualification for apostleship. Peter makes it clear that only the one who has been with Jesus "from the baptism of John" fulfills the necessary and basic requirement for apostleship (Acts 1:21-22). In other words, only he who has been with Jesus from the beginning of his

<sup>908</sup> J.L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961, 270.

ministry (which begins with John the Baptist) is fit to join the exclusive group of the Twelve.

Luke 3:18 makes it clear that the 'good news' began with John the Baptist. Indeed, aspects of Jesus' teaching and lifestyle might be explained by looking at the tradition relating to John the Baptist, for Jesus appears to have taken over John's 'manifesto' and developed it according to his own way and style. Not few are the scholars who believe that Jesus may have studied under John for some time.<sup>909</sup> Attractive as this theory may be, it falls short in the face of John's question from prison in Luke 7:18-23 ("Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?").

Though there may be striking similarities between John and Jesus, there are also striking differences. After his wilderness experience, Jesus goes back to Galilee where he undertakes a ministry quite different from that of John. Jesus sets out on a programme of healing the sick, he raises people from the dead, and proclaims the good news, and performs other miracles. Some scholars deny that there was much similarity between the teaching of John the Baptist and that of Jesus. J. Jeremias, for example, regards Luke 13:1-5 as the only passage that indicates that Jesus preached the same message as John.<sup>910</sup> Some other scholars, however, are of the opinion that repentance was very much central to Jesus' message, just as it had been for John the Baptist. Jesus' message of repentance, it is said, "sets him clearly in the ranks of those who sought a renewal and restoration of Judaism".<sup>911</sup> Such texts as Luke 15:3-7, Luke 8:4-15, and Luke 16:1-13 are often cited<sup>912</sup> in support of this position, except for the fact that the word repentance as such does not occur.

Other sayings of Jesus that have to do with forgiveness have also been cited as underlining the closeness of Jesus' message to that of John. It will be recalled that for John the Baptist, repentance and forgiveness were tied to an eschatological judgment. In Jesus' usage, however, those sayings said to show that Jesus also preached forgiveness are in fact not 'eschatological'. This is clear in Luke 11:4; 5:18-24. For

<sup>909</sup> See, for example, J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 278.

<sup>910</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Proclamation of Jesus Christ*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1971, 156-157.

<sup>911</sup> See, for example, J. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, 87.

<sup>912</sup> See, for example, J.H. Charlesworth, "The Historical Jesus in the Light of Writings Contemporaneous with Him", *ANRW* II.25.1 (1982), 472.

John the Baptist, forgiveness is in view of the long-awaited eschatological event. This is where Jesus differs strikingly with John. In Jesus' use of 'forgiveness' the motif has little (if any) eschatological resonance.<sup>913</sup> In addition, John's call to repentance and forgiveness was addressed to the Jewish nation at large – hence his reference to “we have Abraham as our father” (Luke 3:8) – whereas Jesus (at least in Luke), mostly addresses his calls to repentance to individuals.<sup>914</sup> For example, though the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) does not carry the words, it clearly has to do with repentance (on the part of the son) and forgiveness (on the part of the father). The other parables related to this parable (Luke 15:3-10) also seek to transmit the same idea: repentance of an individual and forgiveness of an individual. John's message was ultimately one of forgiveness of sins, one of the separation of the faithful from the unfaithful: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). In John's teaching, repentance, baptism, and the forgiveness of sins are all meant to assure the penitent a place on the ‘right side’ of the eschatological judgment to come.

It must be noted, however, that even for John, the call to repentance and forgiveness was not addressed to the Jewish nation only.<sup>915</sup> People did not come to John to be baptized as representatives of (or on behalf of) the Jewish nation. Rather, they came as individuals, and it is as individuals that they would be saved or condemned at the eschatological judgment. Certainly on this point, the teachings of John and Jesus came to a confluence. For John, repentance-baptism-forgiveness were crucial conditions for salvation, and it was equally so for Jesus. Entry into, or membership of the kingdom of God, or belonging thereto, was intrinsically inseparable from repentance and forgiveness. For Jesus, therefore, there was no better place or way to start his mission of preaching and converting his wayward countrymen than to start with his own conversion. By accepting John's baptism, Jesus will have taken sides with “all the people and tax collectors [who] justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John” (Luke 7:29). By the same act of accepting John's baptism, Jesus makes it categorically clear that he is not to be counted among “the Pharisees and the lawyers [who] rejected the purpose of God for themselves [by] not having been baptized by

<sup>913</sup> So also E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 111.

<sup>914</sup> See at Luke 5:18-24; 7:47-49; 11:4; 17:3-4; 23:24.

<sup>915</sup> Pace, E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 111.

John" (Luke 7:30). Jesus will have experienced his response to John's teaching as well as his own baptism as an immediate preparation for his own ministry. Thus the 'lessons' he learned from John would form a crucial foundation for Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist was therefore, and in all senses, the "great predecessor" and great mentor of Jesus.<sup>916</sup> John's teaching, in other words, formed at once both the foundation of, as well as the superstructure for Jesus' ministry. J.A. Darr expresses the 'debt' that Jesus owed to John thus:

Jesus and his disciples will go on preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins even as they proclaim good news about the kingdom of God. John's message is part and parcel of their own, and there is no discontinuity between John and Jesus in this regard.<sup>917</sup>

Or, to put the matter another way: "Without the work of John, who would recognize Jesus?"<sup>918</sup>

J.A. Darr uses the term σύγκρισις (which is to say, comparison and contrast) to understand the way in which John and Jesus are related in Luke-Acts. Darr sees the rhetoric of σύγκρισις between John and Jesus evident in the following ways in Luke-Acts:<sup>919</sup>

(1) The two annunciations (Luke 1:8-23 and 1:26-38). Gabriel predicts that John will be great (1:15), an ascetic, the reformer and preparer of Israel for the Lord (1:16-17). Gabriel also avers that Jesus will be called the son of the Most High (*huios hypsistou*). John will *receive* the Holy Spirit while still in the womb, but Jesus actually *will be engendered* by the Spirit;

(2) The births and circumcisions (Luke 1:57-66 and 2:1-21). Except for the special circumstances around his naming, the birth and circumcision of John are uneventful. The nativity of Jesus is accompanied by much spectacle...An angelic oracle informs certain shepherds (and the reader as well) that the newborn will be "a savior, Christ, Lord" (2:11).

(3) The prophetic oracles (Luke 1:67-79 and 2:22-38). Zacharias, prophesying under the influence of the Holy Spirit, predicts that John will be called *prophetes hypsistou*...[John's task will be to] prepare the Lord's ways by reforming his people. Jesus' mission has a notably larger scope...[Jesus is to be] a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of [God's] people Israel (2:30-32).

<sup>916</sup> See also E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 340.

<sup>917</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 71.

<sup>918</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 78.

<sup>919</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 66-67.



Some scholars, in their attempt to understand the nature of the relationship between John and Jesus, go beyond the personalities involved and seek to understand the relationship from a broader and more generalized perspective. Thus, for example, Darr suggests that we view

the relationship between Jesus and John [as] a prism through which we are to view the complex (continuous but discontinuous) relationship between the church and its Jewish matrix...the two appear to be inextricably, permanently linked and yet delineated, ranked, and ordered with care.<sup>920</sup>

In their turn, G. Theissen and A. Merz have proposed a schema that, they suggest, more clearly shows the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. Though Theissen's and Merz's schema is not focused on Luke-Acts as such, there are references in its overall conception to characteristics of John the Baptist that are found only in Luke-Acts, such as, for example, the reference to the axe having been laid to the roots (Luke 3:9). We therefore conclude our present discussion by reproducing in its entirety Theissen's and Metz's schema as, in our view, it sheds some clarity on the discussion:

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<sup>920</sup> J.A. Darr, *On Character Building*, 61.

JOHN THE BAPTIST	JESUS
Preaching of judgment	
John threatens with the μελλουσα ὀργή (wrath to come, Matt. 3.7/Luke 3.7), which will also strike the pious. He criticizes an illusory certainty of salvation which trusts in being a child of Abraham.	Jesus continues John's preaching of judgment. But he seems to have put more emphasis on the offer of salvation (even to sinners) bound up with the preaching of the βασιλεία.
Messianic Preaching	
John expects the ἰσχυρότερος (the stronger one) by whom he understands either God himself or a judge figure (like the Son of Man)	Jesus speaks of the future Son of Man as if he is another figure – possibly he identified himself with this figure or claimed that he already represented him on earth.
Imminent futurist eschatology <sup>921</sup>	
For John, the end of the world is imminent: the axe has already been laid to the roots.	Jesus shares this imminent eschatology but already looks back on a decisive turning point which has begun with John (Matt. 11.12/Luke 16.16; Matt. 11.11/Luke 7:28; Thomas 46) There is a present eschatology in his writings as well as the future eschatology.
The Baptism	
The baptism is an eschatological sacrament administered by John: through public self-accusation (the confession of sins) and baptism, it brings salvation in judgment if those who are baptized bring forth 'fruits of repentance'.	Jesus detaches the notion of repentance from baptism. He himself does not baptize (John 3.22 is corrected in 4.2), but he recognizes John's baptism. The notion of purity which he puts forward (Mark 7.15) is in tension with the sacrament of baptism.
Asceticism	
John acts in a demonstratively ascetic way by Ascetic clothing (a coat of camel hair), Ascetic food (locusts and wild honey), an Ascetic abode (living in the desert in accordance with Isa. 40.3). The asceticism is part of his message: society is criticized by his demonstrative self-stigmatization.	Jesus does not have an ascetic life-style and in this respect is distinguished from John by being called a 'glutton and wine-bibber' (Matt. 11.19) by living in populated areas of Galilee. Ascetic regulations are to be found above all in the mission rules: here asceticism appears as a means of mission.

### 18.3 John the Baptist and Jesus on Social Concern

We have noted in an earlier discussion on Luke 3:10-14 the salient points of John's social ethic. We turn now to a brief consideration of some of the points at which John's and Jesus' ethics converge.

John's teaching was strong on right living and concern for the other person. The first part of John's ethical teaching is in keeping with Old Testament teaching with regard to almsgiving. In Leviticus 19:18c we read: "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". The lawyer who asked Jesus: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" elicits from Jesus the response in the form of a question: "What is written in the

<sup>921</sup> See also P.B. Decock, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*. For Decock, however, the "imminent futurist eschatology" is evident in the way Isaiah 61:1 is used in Luke 7:1-8:3 specifically to indicate how the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in the words and deeds of Jesus in his attempt to reassure a despondent John languishing in Herod's prison.

law?" whereat the lawyer promptly responds with what is clearly a well-known teaching: "You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbour as yourself." Jesus commends the lawyer and tells him: "Do this, and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28). Jesus was one with John the Baptist on solicitude for others. Luke 6:30-31 has Jesus clearly enunciate his 'social doctrine': "Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."<sup>922</sup> This social teaching of John and Jesus is found in its most ideal form in Acts 4:32-35:

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the feet of the apostles, and distribution was made to each according to their need.

John the Baptist already lays out in Luke 3:10-14 the foundation for a life of sharing and concern for one's neighbour. It is striking that, in fact, through his social teaching John prepares the ground for some of the areas that will take on increasing significance in the mission to the Gentiles, for the time when sharing food between Jews and Gentiles will become an issue of some importance. It is noteworthy, for example, how, after Peter has reported to "the circumcised brothers" the circumstances leading to the conversion and baptism of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10-11), the Jewish Christians are not so much upset at Peter's comporting himself with Gentiles, as at the graver fact that he had actually *eaten* with them (Acts 11:3). In his exhortation to share clothing and food, John prepares his hearers for the reality of a broader understanding and application of the concept "children of Abraham". John does not stipulate *who* the multitudes are to share their possessions with, but he speaks at the indeterminate and general level. For John it is clear that anyone in need (i.e. "the one who has not" – ὁ μὴ ἔχοντι) should be catered for. John's ethics of giving and sharing goes beyond specific classification of people, and thus opens the way to an inclusive and open-ended interpretation of "children of Abraham". In the same way, Jesus' social ethics is strong on concern for the other, without regard to nationality (Luke 10:30-37), or social statues, as in the parable of the importunate widow to whom the corrupt judge would not grant legal rights (Luke

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<sup>922</sup> See also Luke 12:33.

18:1-7). Jesus' ethical demands, like those of John, went beyond class and status. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is a paradigm about how *not* to relate at the social level.

John's social ethics extended to teaching on right moral behaviour. Though this aspect of John's message is briefly narrated in the very short account of why Herod had arrested John (Luke 3:19 – "Herod the tetrarch...had been reprov'd by [John] for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done"), it is brought to mind in reading Luke 16:18 on Jesus' stance regarding marital relationships: "Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery". Jesus teaches the indissolubility of marriage, specifically on account of divorce, and this is reminiscent of the reason (at least according to the Gospels) for which John the Baptist was killed by Herod. John had apparently taken a strong position against Herod's marrying his brother's wife, in contravention of the teaching against such practices in Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21. In Luke 13:31-33 Jesus calls Herod "that fox". Both John and Jesus had their turn with Herod; the one came to grief through Herod, while Herod was to feature prominently during one of the trials of Jesus (Luke 23:6-12).

Briefly, therefore, John's social teaching is echoed in Jesus' ministry which, as scholars have noted, is one in which the disadvantaged and/or excluded members of society (for example the poor, the sick, Samaritans, women in general) feature prominently as receiving favourable treatment from Jesus.

#### ***18.4 Jesus' Estimation of John the Baptist***

Without doubt, the highest accolade ever given to anyone in the New Testament is the one the author of Luke-Acts recounts as that given to John by Jesus: "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28a). This statement is set in the account describing how John, languishing in prison, and from where, hearing about the ministry of Jesus, he dispatches two of his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come,, or shall we look for another?" (Luke 7:18-19; see

7:18-23).<sup>923</sup> While Jesus' answer may leave the reader of Luke-Acts with the belief that Jesus in fact identifies himself with the 'coming one' of John's earlier preaching, could it really be said whether John actually went to his grave with the assurance that his 'coming one' had indeed come, and that he had come specifically in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth? It is in any case striking that practically on the eve of his death John should still be in some doubt about his own ministry, for it is just a little over a chapter later that we are told of his death (Luke 9:7-9). If, however, John was in some doubt about Jesus' ministry, Jesus himself was certainly in no doubt about John. John is a prophet and, yes, much more than a prophet; he is the one about whom the prophets of old spoke, the messenger to prepare the way of God. To cap it all, John is the greatest of all born of women, in other words, the greatest of all people on earth. Jesus thus affirms and applauds John in quite a categorical way.

The author of Luke-Acts tells us in Luke 3:7-14 that John's fame was such that he attracted vast crowds to himself, and that John led multitudes to repentance and to baptism. For Jesus this marks the beginning of the age of the Kingdom of God. John stands at the foundation of the Gospel. He inaugurates the age of salvation, the commencement of the reign of God. Jesus thus exhorts his hearers to accord John the high esteem and respect that are due to him. In any case, as we have noted elsewhere, for many of the earliest Christian communities (such as those of Mark 9:11-13; Matthew 11:14; 17:10-12; Luke 1:17) John was Elijah *redivivus*.<sup>924</sup> It seems very likely that Jesus and the people of his time thought so too.

All that has been said of Jesus' high esteem of John may be true, however, but it all appears to be cancelled out by what Jesus next says of John: "none is greater than John, yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28b).

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<sup>923</sup> See J.A. Darr's discussion of this question in *On Character Building*, 76. Briefly, Darr holds that "The question is significant... Since a recognition scene has not occurred and John was not privy (so far as we are told) to the Spirit's descent upon Jesus, the Baptist cannot be faulted for his lack of knowledge about Jesus."

<sup>924</sup> In Mark 9:9-13 and Matthew 17:9-13 the identification of John by Jesus is more explicitly stated. In the Fourth Gospel (1:21) however, John is, of course, made to deny that he is Elijah or indeed anything else that the people believe and claim him to be. The dogged determination of early Christianity in maintaining the identification of John as Elijah, even while remaining faithful to John's own denial of this association does appear to us to indicate that the tradition of identifying John with Elijah was a given and commonplace.



What could Jesus be saying by this apparent contradiction? In the *Gospel of Thomas* we find this logion expressed as:

From Adam until John the Baptist there is among those born of women no one superior to John the Baptist, in that his eyes will not be lowered. But I have said that whoever among you becomes as a child shall know the kingdom, and shall become superior to John. (Logion 46).

In both Luke and the *Gospel of Thomas* we have what J.P. Meier has termed a "dialectical negation".<sup>925</sup> The paradox that we see in Jesus' statements about John (he is at once the greatest among those born of women, and yet lower than the least in the kingdom of God) is of the same kind as other paradoxes we find in the New Testament generally, and in Luke-Acts in particular. Thus in Luke 10:21, for example, the model of perfection in Jesus' view is the little child or the baby, and so it is that God has revealed his wisdom to babies. It is to children that the kingdom of God belongs (Luke 18:15-17). There are various other sayings of Jesus in Luke-Acts in which opposite categories are inverted. Thus, for example, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11, see also 18:9-14); "let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:26); "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30); "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Luke 18:17). When read in the light of these or similar texts, it becomes clear that in referring to John as one who is less than the least in the kingdom of God, Jesus is not undermining him. Rather, through what J.P. Meier terms "dialectical negation", Jesus extols the significance of the least. Thus, with reference to Luke 7:28b, the point that Jesus makes is not about John. Jesus rather makes a point about the radical inversions in the kingdom of God. There is still no one greater than John.<sup>926</sup> As D.R. Catchpole notes, "Jesus surveys the whole of human history and declares that at no time has anyone been appointed by God to a more significant mission than that of John."<sup>927</sup>

In Luke-Acts John is placed at a crossroads in the history of salvation: he stands both at the closing of the 'old' era as well as at the beginning of the new one. In Luke 3:18

<sup>925</sup> J.P., Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, 143.

<sup>926</sup> See also J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 303-304.

<sup>927</sup> D.R. Catchpole, "The Beginning of Q: A Proposal", *NTS* 38, (1992), 209.

we are told that it was John who told the good news, and the same verb εὐηγγελίζετο (preached the good news) is used of John in Luke 16:16 in describing his proclamation. In other words, the good news is proclaimed in John's message. For Luke-Acts, therefore, the kingdom of God begins with John's proclamation. It is striking in itself that Luke twice states that John the Baptist proclaimed the good news. It is with John that the eschatological age really begins (Acts 1:5; 10:37; 13:24-25; 19:4).

While John is fully immersed in his time and is a paragon of virtue in the dying era, in which he was the greatest among those born of women, in the 'new' era, however, the era of the kingdom of God, there are some who are now greater than he. C. Scobie expresses the same idea this way:

What Jesus held was that John had a place in God's purposes. God's purposes, however, were developing. John's role was an important one, but it was only a stage in the process which was culminating in the person of Jesus himself. John's ministry was divinely authorized and used by God to call the people to repentance; now, however, the new age was actually breaking in, and the age of the Gospel was succeeding the age of the Law...in his providence, God used John as the forerunner of the Kingdom.<sup>928</sup>

In other words, Jesus' elevation of John holds true for the previous era, while the dawning era, the era of the kingdom of God, has its own 'greats'. John is *of* the kingdom of God, but not *in* it as it is inchoate, still in the process of dawning; hence the least in the kingdom of God can in this sense be said to be greater than he without in any way undermining the status of John in the history of salvation. Indeed it is to be noted how, in his later ministry, at the centre of which stands the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the need to repent or to prepare oneself in other ways for its coming, John continues to be influential. He is referred to by Jesus or by Jesus' disciples as an example to be emulated. Thus, the disciples go to Jesus and say: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1), or Jesus' high regard for John's ascetic life (Luke 7:31-35). In other words, therefore, though he is of the 'old' dispensation, John is very much relevant in the 'new'.

<sup>928</sup> C. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 161-162.

### 18.5 Conclusion

Luke-Acts has preserved, together with Mark and Matthew, a rather curious tradition about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. In Luke 9:7-9 we read:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done [by Jesus], and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen. Herod said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?"

In Mark 6:14-16, in the context of the description of the circumstances leading to John's death at the hands of Herod Antipas, it is reported how

Herod heard of [what Jesus was doing]; for Jesus' fame had become known. Some said, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him" ... But when Herod heard of it he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Matthew 14:1-2, also describing the death of John the Baptist, reports that:

At that time, Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus; and he said to his servants, "This [Jesus] is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers work in him."

The same identification of Jesus with John the Baptist is encountered in another series of texts. In Luke 9:18-20, the disciples' declaration about the identity of Jesus is described thus:

Now it happened that as [Jesus] was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, "Who do the people say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist..."

The same episode is seen in its original form in Mark 8:27-28:

And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist..."

while Matthew 16:13-14 has:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist..."

These texts and others similar to them throw into serious doubt the reading in the Fourth Gospel that the ministries of John and Jesus overlapped, and indeed that both were baptizing at the same time though in different localities (John 3:23-4:3). It is to be noted, however, that the author of the Fourth Gospel quickly corrects this 'mistake': "Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, *although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples...*" 4:1-2). If the Synoptic tradition is accepted, there was hardly much (if indeed any) overlap between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. The indication appears to be that by the time Jesus was famous John was already dead (or at least in prison). This would make it easy to see why there were rumours circulating among the people that Jesus was John *redivivus*. Even Herod Antipas is said to have believed this (Luke 9:9). All this could have occurred only if Jesus did not appear on the scene while John was still in circulation and well known. It was only when John had been removed from the scene (that is to say when he was either in prison or already dead) that people would have begun to think that Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist. It should then be possible to conclude that if there was an overlap in the ministries of John and Jesus, it cannot have been a long one. In the words of J.E. Taylor:

Certainly, Jesus and John could not have had contemporaneous missions if this tradition of considering Jesus a resurrected John is to be given credence; it could only have arisen if people knew that Jesus did not appear on the scene until John had been taken away. If they had been baptizing at the same time in opposition to one another, then no one could have supposed that Jesus was John in resurrected form.

These considerations, then, would suggest that Jesus began to go about in Galilee only after John was arrested and that, soon after John was arrested, he was killed. The precise time of John's execution may not have been accurately known; it was close enough to the time that Jesus came into Galilee as a prophet to suggest to some that Jesus was John. People may have believed that John had been killed at a time when, in fact, he was still alive in prison. However, the passage concerning John's question seems to indicate that as Jesus became known, John was still alive. His death may have followed shortly afterwards.<sup>929</sup>

The fact that it was possible to make this cross-identification between John and Jesus raises some interesting questions vis-à-vis the basis for John's fame. Clearly, a lot of what Jesus did and said was very readily and all too easily associated with John.

<sup>929</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 294.

To adopt and paraphrase Jesus' listing in Luke 7:20-22, was John the Baptist curing "many of diseases and plague and evil spirits, and was he bestowing sight on many that were blind"? When Jesus says: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them", are these activities in any way to be associated with John the Baptist as well? If not, wherein lies the ground for the people's (and Herod's) belief that Jesus was John the Baptist, since both Mark and Matthew make it clear that it was precisely because "these powers work in him" (that is to say powers to heal and to raise the dead and to perform miracles and to preach the good news) that Jesus was believed to be John the Baptist? Was John then able to raise the dead, give sight to the blind, and to work other miracles? The question arises because the spontaneity with which the answer to Jesus' question "Who do people say that I am" is given is quite striking. There is no hint of any indication that the disciples have to search around and rack their brains for an answer. Our texts, as they stand, unfortunately do not offer any guidance on this point, and to argue from silence would be futile speculation. The question, however, would be a very interesting one to follow up on, but suffice it for now simply to note it as a point for possible further investigation.

## 19. CONCLUSION

We conclude our narrative-theological analysis of texts on John the Baptist in Luke-Acts by noting that, from the birth narrative early in the Third Gospel to well into Acts, John serves as a model of preparedness for the advent of God's judgment. Those who accept John's baptism of repentance and prophetic exhortation to justice, and who wait in active anticipation of 'the day of the Lord' are able to recognize and to respond appropriately to John's message. John is a transition figure who brings to a close the age of the law and the prophets, while inaugurating the new age of the revelation of God's salvation for all humanity. John is both a prophet of the old era as well as a witness to the new age of salvation for all.



## GENERAL CONCLUSION

This study has been an attempt to understand the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts from a reading that combines social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to gain hermeneutical access to John the Baptist. In his portrayal of John the Baptist as a prophet and witness who plays a unique role in the history of salvation, the author of Luke-Acts weaves a spell over his readers by which he attempts to lead them to an appreciation of John the Baptist as an example to be emulated in living out the Christian ideal and in carrying out the mandate to proclaim the good news

It has been the intention of this study to be sensitive to John the Baptist as a unique individual who may, in the spirit in which he is portrayed in Luke-Acts, be taken on his own terms. We have noted that in the received canonical tradition there is a clear tendency to emphasize a theologically subordinate status for John in relation to Jesus. Ours, however, has been an attempt in the opposite direction, namely to show that the author of Luke-Acts has preserved a unique dynamic of John the Baptist that has either been omitted or eliminated by the other Gospel traditions. To this end, our author has highlighted those characteristics of John the Baptist that, in the eyes of this author, and in spite of John's perceived subordinacy, make John stand out as a paradigm of prophetic witness to be emulated with conviction and imagination.

In spite of his prominence in Luke-Acts, John the Baptist is seen by some scholars as cutting a tragic figure, understood neither by Judaism nor by Christianity. As T.H. Lim has noted: "Orthodox Christianity took him over as a witness to Jesus the messiah. Orthodox Judaism subsequently ignored him for similar reasons. It is for the historian and critical scholar to restore the balance."<sup>930</sup> Perhaps a more determined recourse, by both the Jewish and Christian traditions, to Josephus' tacit recognition of John as a significant figure in the religious and political life of late Second Temple Judaism (*Ant.* 18.5.2) might go some way towards restoring the "balance" that Lim speaks of. On the other hand, an appreciation of Luke's perspective on the role played by John the Baptist in the history of salvation might also go some way towards rehabilitating him in the Christian tradition. Some decades ago, Daniel-Rops bemoaned the fact that John the Baptist appears to be "a mere

<sup>930</sup> T.H. Lim (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2000, 64.

episode in the Gospel”<sup>931</sup> The author of Luke-Acts inherited an early tradition that created this ‘episode’. John the Baptist is presented in the canonical Gospels as “not fit to untie the sandals” of a mightier one coming after him. John is looked at askance because he is said to baptize only with water, while the coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15-17; Mark 1:77-8; Matthew 3:11-12; John 1:24-28). Indeed, John’s baptism is considered to be not only inferior to, but incomplete in comparison with that of Jesus and other early Christians (Acts 19:1-7). The same tradition of which the author of Luke-Acts was a recipient has John strenuously refuting any notion that *he* might be the long awaited saviour, the ‘Christ’ to come (Luke 3:15; John 3:25-30). The wall of prejudice thus erected around John by the canonical tradition is truly massive, while Jesus of Nazareth is raised to an unassailable position as *the* chosen agent of salvation and *the* consummator of Old Testament prophetic witness and proclamation.

Such is the ‘mere episode’ that is John the Baptist according to canonical New Testament literature. And yet we have noted in the course of this study that the author of Luke-Acts was not only *not* able to sustain such an inferior perception of John, but that he went out of his way to portray John as a paragon of authentic prophetic witness, whose contribution to salvation history was, to paraphrase Luke 7:28, “greater than that of any born of women.” There is no suggestion here that this was an easy balancing act for the author of Luke-Acts, given the overwhelmingly negative perception of John around which he had to work. This is seen in how Luke at times appears to vacillate between upholding the prevailing tradition and boldly striking a direction of his own in his assessment of John the Baptist.

Note has been taken of some of the attempts by scholars to offer explanation for what they believe are some of the causes behind the overwhelming emphasis on John’s inferiority in the canonical New Testament tradition. There have been proposals that this may have been due to the presence of two polemicized camps: the John camp and the Jesus camp. This explanation is drawn largely from the observation that there appeared to be a rivalry between the two groups, seen for example in the presentation of each group as having had its own way of prayer (Luke 11:1), a different practice

<sup>931</sup> Daniel-Rops, *Jesus in His Time*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955, 68.

with regard to fasting (Luke 5:33-39; Mark 2:18-22), and different dietary customs (Luke 7:33-34). In addition, both John and Jesus are presented as each having had a group of followers or disciples (Luke 5:33; 11:1; John 3:25). In themselves, however, these differences need not mean that there was rivalry between the followers of John the Baptist and those of Jesus, for, as we have noted in Part Two, different groups and movements in late Second Temple Judaism and indeed even in the late First Century C.E. observed different customs and/or rituals according to their persuasions. The main point at issue between the John camp and the Jesus camp, if we accept the suggestion that these represented two polemicized movements, would have been around the claim by the Jesus group that Jesus was the Messiah, which of necessity relativized all other figures of the past, including, in this case, John the Baptist.

Another attempt we noted at explaining the perceived inferiority of John the Baptist was that by J.G. Gager who sought to apply the theory of cognitive dissonance to the relationship between John and Jesus as well as between their movements. According to this model, the qualities and actions attributed to Jesus are to be understood as a re-interpretation and a transference of those same qualities from John the Baptist to Jesus. Certainly some of the Lucan texts studied above may lend themselves to the attractive conclusion that, indeed, according to some of the principles of the theory of cognitive dissonance, Jesus could have been understood in earliest Christianity as John the Baptist *redivivus*. This line of thought has, however, not been much pursued by scholars, though R.P. Carroll<sup>932</sup> and J.G. Gager<sup>933</sup> have both presented rather convincing scenarios, the former in his application of the theory to Old Testament prophecy, and the latter in his attempt to recreate the emergence of Christianity from the ashes of disillusionment and a crisis of faith among some early Christians. Clearly, however, the application to and interpretation of the theory of cognitive dissonance in biblical studies in general still requires much critical investigation, while the application and interpretation of the same theory to John the Baptist in particular can hardly be said to have even commenced yet.

<sup>932</sup> See R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Fails*.

<sup>933</sup> See again to J.G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 37-49.

We have noted in the course of this study how some eschatological expectations generated around the activity of John the Baptist (Luke 3:15)<sup>934</sup> eventually formed the core of Jesus' proclamation and ministry as this is enunciated by Jesus himself in Luke 7:18-23.<sup>935</sup> We also noted how, in Luke-Acts, Jesus is on some occasions mistaken for John (e.g. Luke 9:18-21), in spite of the fact that by then John had already been reported to have died (Luke 9:7-9). Herod specifically wonders whether the incredible deeds being performed by Jesus were in fact not being performed by a resurrected John the Baptist, whom he (Herod) himself had had killed (Luke 9:7-9). Therefore, rather than speak in terms of polarization and polemics between a John the Baptist camp and a Jesus camp as some have done,<sup>936</sup> it may perhaps be possible to see, with the proponents of the theory of cognitive dissonance, a logical progression from a diminution of the role of John the Baptist (after he was dead) in favour of an elevation of the role of Jesus in the process of re-interpreting and giving new impetus to the eschatological expectation of earliest Christianity.

What has emerged from our investigation is that, both in his own life and ministry, as well as in testimony about him, and also in the popular perception that rose around him in relation to the messianic and eschatological age, John the Baptist is fundamental to the *Heilsgeschichte* as it unfolds in the Lucan writings. From a Lucan perspective, it is hardly possible to see how the story of both Jesus of Nazareth as well as that of the emergence and growth of the Christian movement could have been recounted without the foundational inspiration of John the Baptist. It is clear in Luke-Acts that Jesus makes 'sense' in relation to John. In other words, John holds both the theological as well as the hermeneutical keys to Luke-Acts. His importance lies also in the fact that he is presented as standing astride two eras: the old era (the Old Testament and the salvation of the Jews), and the new era (the New Testament and the salvation of all who repent), thus inseparably linking the two epochs. From a literary point of view, John helps to hold Luke and Acts together. Apart from Jesus and Peter, John is the only other protagonist of Luke-Acts who crosses the narrative bridge between the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. In the Third Gospel John the Baptist forms the backdrop from which the history of salvation is to be understood,

<sup>934</sup> See also Luke 3:18, in which we are told that John "preached good news".

<sup>935</sup> See also Luke 4:16-21.

<sup>936</sup> See, for example, R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 164-166.

while in Acts the proclamation of the Gospel is clearly understood to have begun with John (Luke 3:15), to whose ministry the beginning of authentic witness to Jesus is traced (Acts 1:22). For the apostles deliberating the replacement of Judas Iscariot, John's baptizing ministry is the decisive period from which to date the qualification necessary for apostleship: "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John...must become with us a witness" (Acts 1:22).

Thus the significance of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts.

Building upon the methodology set out in the general introduction and adopted throughout this study, namely a combination of social description and narrative-theological analysis, the use of social description has sought to make this investigation contextual by locating John the Baptist within late Second Temple Judaism and at the dawn of the Christian era. This has resulted in an analysis of the social, religious and historical contexts within which John lived and exercised his ministry as prophet, baptizer and witness.

In its narrative-theological approach this study has sought to be exegetical. Key passages relating to John the Baptist have been identified and analyzed in order to draw as close as possible to the mindset of the author of Luke-Acts in portraying John the Baptist in the precise way he does.

In its theological endeavour the study has sought to understand the role of John the Baptist in the history of salvation as this is presented in Luke-Acts. John the Baptist is portrayed as a prophet who prepares the people for the coming judgment of God and for the salvation of those who repent and accept his baptism. It is the position of the author of Luke-Acts that the proclamation of the good news began with John (Luke 3:18), and that the outreach to the Gentiles was initiated by John when he presented repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins as the new qualification for being children of Abraham.

Lastly, the study has sought to derive hermeneutical benefit from its combination of social description and narrative-theological analysis. In his presentation of John the Baptist the author of Luke-Acts clearly sets out to impress his audience, to weave a



spell over them that makes them see John as the paragon of prophetic witness, the living out of the Christian ideal, and the proclamation of the good news. In other words, the author of Luke-Acts has shaped his picture of John the Baptist after his own image of an authentic prophet and witness. In Luke-Acts, therefore, the Christian mandate is to be both a 'prophet' and a 'witness' (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8) in a way that recalls the ministry of John the Baptist. J.E. Taylor has noted how even though John the Baptist was "very much a Jew of his time and place", he is also to "be seen as a building block on which the Church would be constructed".<sup>937</sup>

This is, however, not to say that John the Baptist is in any way to be seen as a sort of proto-Christian or "incipient Christian" as R.E. Brown has called him.<sup>938</sup> It is, rather, to acknowledge that indeed, and according to Luke's assessment, "among those born of women none is greater than John."

We conclude our study on the role of John the Baptist in Luke-Acts by reiterating a point that we made in the general introduction, namely that this study has sought to contribute to Lucan studies in two ways. In the first place there has been an attempt (through a combination of critical approaches) to provide a reading of Luke-Acts that combines social description and narrative-theological analysis in order to make possible a rhetorical engagement with the text in a way that provides hermeneutical access to John the Baptist as he is portrayed in Luke-Acts. We spoke in this respect of the author of Luke-Acts weaving a spell over the reader in such a way that he or she cannot be left unaffected by the portrait of John the Baptist which he or she encounters in Luke's narrative.

In the second place the present study has also sought to show how Luke-Acts preserves a unique dynamic of John the Baptist which has consciously or unconsciously been omitted in the other Gospel traditions. Through this dynamic, the author of Luke-Acts has sought to transmit an ideal of the authentic prophet and witness in such a way that his audience might be moved to emulate the example of John the Baptist in their proclamation of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

<sup>937</sup> J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 8.

<sup>938</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 284-285.

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